THRILLING

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SCIENCE FICTION

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WE, THE MACHINE
by Gerald Vance

FROM THESE ASHES
by Frederic Brown

THE LAST REVOLUTION
by Stephen Marlowe

UNITED WE STAND
by Mack Reynolds

AND NO TOMORROW
by Russell Storm

THE SORCERESS
by Rog Phillips

SPIDERS OF SATURN
by V. E. Thiessen

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THE SORCERESS

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EXCITING STORIES IN STRANGE WORLDS

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THRILLING SCIENCE FICTION is published bi-monthly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Box 7, Oakland Garden, Flushing, N.Y. 11364 at 60¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) U.S. and possessions: $3.00; Canada and Pan American Union Countries: $3.50; all other countries: $4.00. Copyright 1971 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Copyrighted 1949 1950, 1951, 1952, by Ziff-Davis Publishing Co. All rights reserved.

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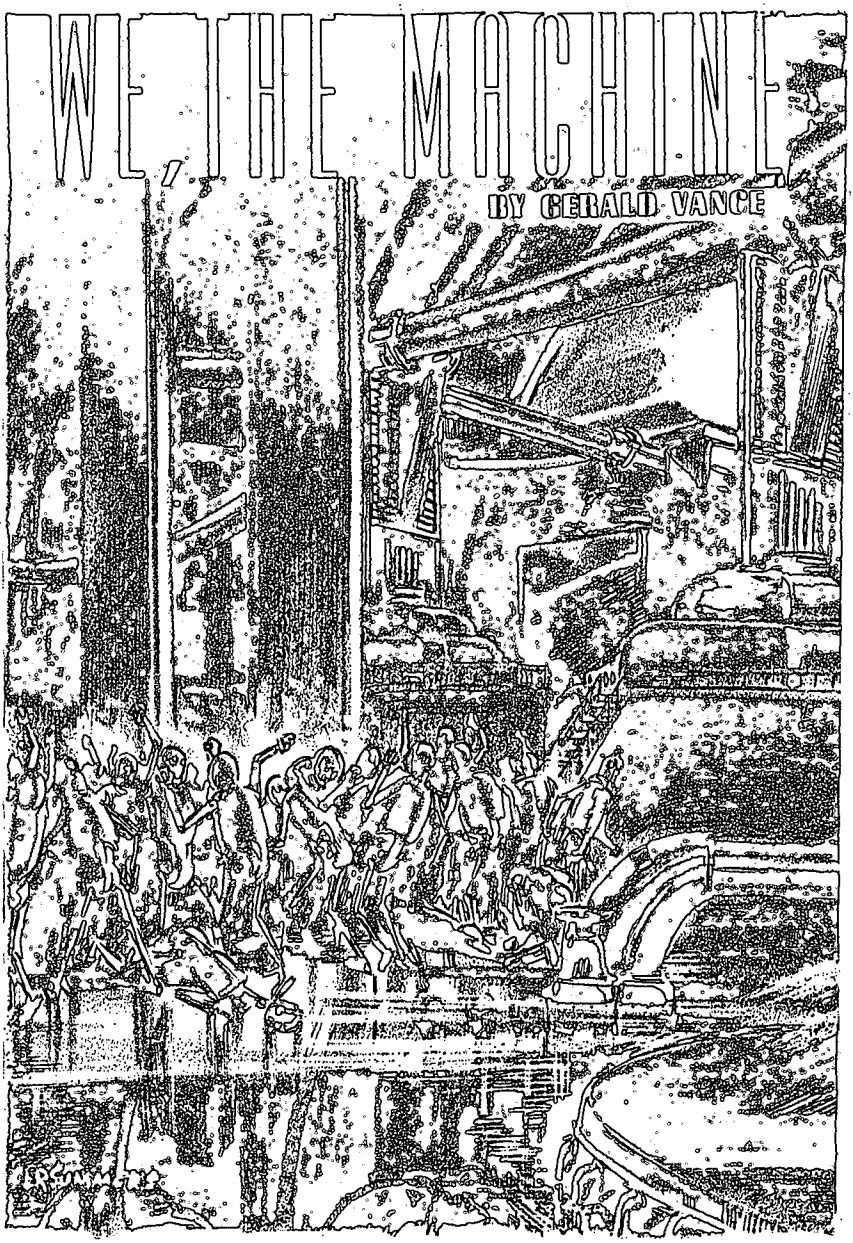
WE THE MACHINE

BY GERALD VANCE



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DEEP IN the heart of the earth, the Machine is crying. Above—on the surface of the earth—all is changed. The Golden Age is finished. The high crest of another civilization—the most exquisitely perfect civilization ever conceived—has passed, and man once more starts down the long swale into darkness.

Above this subterranean room in which I sit, the darkness is already setting in, like weeping mothers burying dead sons in the rain. Down here—around me—the Machine sobs out its last moments and there is little to say.

Except that we built this colossal, soulless Machine—and then we broke its heart.

Strange will be these words to the men who find them in other times—other ages—other eras of human struggle toward the glittering successes we achieved and the sickening mistakes we made. But it must be told—the story of what we did and what we had; and how the shattering failure came about. Without this record for tomorrow's man, we shall have served no purpose whatever and our name shall be Futility.

So the last task remains for me—the telling. Read—man of the future. Believe. And take heed as I tell you of the Machine. Take heed, for your own fate is involved.

* * *

MY NAME is Lorn Morrison. Only a few days have passed since the morning I had nothing more important on my mind than a manuscript I had just finished. In this age of leisure, where every man selected his own pursuits, I chose to be a Novelist. I lived comfortably in the city of Baltimore with a room-mate, also of my choice, who found pleasure in his activities as a Spectator. He went from place to place observing the activities of Athletes and Actors. He was well up on current tastes and an excellent critic of popular fiction.

We were at the breakfast table on the morning to which I refer, and he had just finished reading my manuscript. He put down the last sheet, frowning thoughtfully.

"Well?"

"It's your best so far. But you can do better."

"Do you think the Machine will like it?"

"It liked the last two."

I shrugged. "Twenty-five copies of the first."

"And five hundred copies of the second."

He pushed the manuscript across the table toward me. "I'm betting on five thousand copies of this one. Are you submitting it today?"

"Yes. I'd better get started if I want to get back for dinner. I'll help you clear the dishes first."

"Never mind. I'll do it."

I went for my hat and jacket. When I returned through the dining room, he was just putting the last of the dishes into the suction tube through which they would be returned to the central sterilizing depot in Chicago. "Luck," he said.

I thanked him. Then—with the door half open—I turned back. "How many dishes," I asked, "would you say are now flying back through the tubes toward the sterilizer?"

He looked up in surprise. "How many? Why good lord, man! How should I know? Besides, what difference does it make?"

"None, I suppose. But somehow your answer—'What difference does it make?'—seems important to me."

"I don't understand you."

With a sudden movement, I closed the door and dropped into a chair

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nearby. "No—I suppose you don't. I hardly understand myself."

Immediately my room-mate's face cleared. "I think I do know what's wrong with you. Overwork on that book of yours. You probably don't realize it, but you're taking on the characteristics of LeMonson, your fictional protagonist. I'd suggest a couple of weeks in the Florida Gardens or the Northern Winter Resort."

"Maybe that's what I need, but still—I'd like to ask you a question—that is, if it won't offend you."

"Ask ahead. I'm not sensitive."

"Very well. Have you ever—during your whole lifetime—felt one iota of gratitude toward the Machine in return for what it has done for you?"

He was truly bewildered now. "Gratitude? Why of course not. Why should I?"

"Do you ever stop a moment to consider that in ages past, men worked hard all their lives for only a small portion of what the Machine gives you every day without charge."

"Possibly I have. I don't recall."

"I've thought of it many times."

"And your latest book shows it. But your line of thought is unhealthy and erroneous. You forget the Machine is the product of *our* minds, *our* know-how in ages past, *our* ability to create the perfect civilization."

"Again you are no doubt right. But your words bring forth another question: Can you point out to me just one man or woman living in America today who knows anything whatsoever about the Machine? Who has the vaguest concept of its mechanics? Who has the least interest in what goes on under the earth?"

He was turning a trifle hostile now. "No—I cannot. But my answer is this: When man finally achieved perfection in the form of the Machine, he recognized it for what it really was—a reflection of his own ability, and as such, he reaps its benefits."

I wanted to ask—*What perfection in you or me does the Machine reflect?* Instead, I replied, "I think you're right—I do need a vacation. Wish me luck with my book." With that I left the house and went out into the street.

THE MACHINE—in all its vast entirety—was conceived by Gideon Lee, who worked ceaselessly toward its perfection during all the latter years of his life. He died in the year 2155.

That passage, written into the manuscript I carried, ran again across my mind as I walked through the Baltimore streets toward the passenger tube depot.

After Lee died, a number of other major scientists took up the work. Two hundred years later, they were all gone—or rather, they *are* all gone, because that time is now. But all around me, as I approached the tube terminal, were the benefits to mankind of the colossal, smoothly working, self-sufficient Machine.

The Machine fed, clothed, and sustained two hundred million people within the boundaries of the most powerful nation on earth, Middle America. Its operations were so complex and prodigious as to be entirely beyond comprehension. A concept of it can be vaguely gotten when one views it from the vantage point of its achievements. And these achievements were so vast they could only be viewed singly.

Three times a day and also upon individual demand, the Machine sent food—ready for consumption—into every registered home in the nation; this, in all directions from its central kitchens, the exact location of which not one person in a million knew nor cared to know.

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The Machine—through an entirely separate distributing system—kept thousands of clothing stores stocked with garments of all sizes—in an amazing number of styles and patterns. Nor did off-size citizens go unclothed. At every distribution point a robot tailor took measurements and one of the tubes from Chicago delivered the finished garment in thirty minutes. If the material was out of stock and required weaving, the waiting time was fifteen minutes longer.

The Machine maintained, night and day, year in and year out, an impregnable defense system at the borders of the country; a ray-system so formidable that no envious nation had ever tried to invade Mid-America.

The Machine conducted, automatically, an Immigration System based upon its capacity to serve the people. A certain quota of foreigners were allowed to enter yearly. But the Machine analyzed each mind so completely that no spy or hostile agent had ever entered the American Utopia.

These were but a small number of the end-products of the Machine; products which totaled complete emancipation of the people; freedom to conduct themselves entirely as they saw fit; leisure to pursue hobbies and follow paths leading to personal happiness.

Utopia.

But as I took my seat in the tube car which would carry me to Chicago in a scant ten minutes, the questions were in my mind: Am I the only person in two hundred million who does not view all this with complete acceptance and disinterest? Am I the only one who wonders about the vast processes going on under the earth that make it all possible?

As I quitted my car in the Chicago terminal and walked among the unhurried, contented people who moved toward the exits, I recalled the words of my room-mate: "You are a novelist, a good one. It follows that you are a trifle peculiar in your thinking."

I boarded a local car for Station 37, where all writers and composers submitted their works, and now my mind was full of my own problems. Suppose the Machine rejected my novel?

THE MAN seated next to me with a brown manuscript case on his knees smiled as he glanced at the thick sheaf of copy I carried.

"You are a Novelist?"

I replied that I was. "My name is Morrison."

His eyes lighted. "I know of you! The Machine delivered me a copy of your second book. My name is Danley. I write musical comedies." Danley made no further comment upon my second novel; he had no word for its quality or its lack thereof and I expected none. The fact that he'd received my book proved that he had liked it, because—

The Machine was sole judge of all creative work. No man could publish his own because only the Machine had such facilities. It examined the material and knew immediately how many citizens—if any—would care for it. This information it gleaned from its Brain Plate Files. In the case of a novel, the Machine printed and delivered the exact number of copies which would be read and enjoyed. Musical and dramatic works were delivered to the Musicians and the Producers and were piped into homes where they would be appreciated. This was another detail of cultural life attended to by the Machine.

"Have your works been produced?" I asked.

"Only one," Danley replied ruefully. "A one-act, popular thing that

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played to sixty-four video plates."

"My first book went only twenty-five copies."

"Is that so?" He sighed. "I guess it takes time."

"Yes, it takes time," and I followed Danley from the tube-car and went into Room 10 of Station 37.

Only two other authors were in the room. They had already submitted and were now awaiting the verdict of the Machine. The elder of the two, a middle-aged man, seemed supremely confident. He sat back completely at ease and stared at the ceiling as though the plot of his next story was already forming.

The younger man sat beside the dispenser from which a lighted cigarette was held forth by two steel fingers whenever he raised his hand to break the electronic beam. He smoked the cigarettes in short nervous puffs and eyed the bulk of the manuscript I pushed into the submission slot. Now I, too, sat back to wait.

Almost immediately the green signal light flashed and the elderly man came forward to the panel. He watched as copies of his book began feeding through behind the green plate. They moved past slowly at first and I could read the title—*Morning of Promise*. Then they began flowing faster while the dial high on the wall recorded their number. The dial stopped at 896; the last book vanished toward the distribution tubes and two copies popped out of the wall into the author's hands.

The man stood there for a minute. The frown on his face made his disappointment quite evident. Then he thrust the books under his arm and strode out into the street.

"He must have expected more copies," the young man said.

"I guess we all expect more than we get."

"Not me. I wrote a volume of poetry. I'll be satisfied with the minimum. Very few people like poetry."

Now another light on the board. Sadly, a red one. The young man got to his feet, put out his cigarette and thrust his hands deep into his pockets. The red light meant a rejection.

"Guess I'll have to try again," the youth muttered. He went to the panel—to the return slot—to retrieve his manuscript.

But there was some delay. The script was not immediately forthcoming. Both the young man and I were surprised by this—both having been here before and being familiar with the precision of the Literary Robot buried deep in the earth.

Then a bell rang—the recall bell—and a single, leather bound volume came out of the slot. Surprised and pleased, the young man fingered the volume. It was beautifully done, with his name written in gold leaf on the cover. He smiled and hurried away.

WITH NOTHING else to do, I gave thought to the incident. Ten books, I knew, was the minimum the Machine would produce. Yet, in this case, it had presented the author with a single copy. For some reason, the Literary Robot had salved the youth's ego. A slight shock went through me as I thought:

The Machine is an absolutely mathematical mechanism. Yet what I had just seen was a gesture springing from humanity. Mathematics and humanity do not mix. How can the Machine be personal and impersonal at the same time?

But I was to see more irregularity, immediately, as the green light brought me erect and to the panel. Five thousand copies, I thought. At least five thousand. It's a good book.

But no volumes were forthcoming. Only dead silence in the room, the green light shining, the volume-count

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dial unmoving. Thus things remained for an interminable time while I stood there filled with definite and sudden fear. It was a fear I could not explain, yet it was present, tangible in my mind.

No occurrence such as this had ever before come to pass in Room 10 of Station 37—of that I was certain. This was the first time on record that the green acceptance light had flashed and no books had been forthcoming. My throat was dry and my legs shook in weakness.

Then the light over the rejection slot glowed and the slot door opened. Automatically, I held out my hand and a slip of white paper came forth. My fingers clutched it, turned it, raised it. Printed in small, block letters were the words:

LORN MORRISON—27yj459x. YOU WILL BE NOTIFIED IN DUE TIME.

That was all. My name; my code number in the Brain-Plate Files. A brief message.

I glanced swiftly about the room with all the look of a trapped, bewildered animal. Something had gone wrong! Something out of the ordinary had happened and I was involved in it. I turned and fled out into the street—up the avenue until I came to a refreshment booth. I went inside and punched one of the buttons under Alcoholic Depressants, not noting which particular drink I had ordered.

I waited while the ray-beam tested me for intoxication. As I had not been drinking, it found none, and the drink came from the slot as ordered. I tossed it off and went again into the street.

Something had happened and I was involved! I walked on aimlessly, nervous as a cat until the alcohol began asserting itself and my nerves calmed. Slowly my mental equilibrium returned. Above me the sun shone down on the great glittering buildings lining the avenue; past me walked men and women, their faces free of fear, worry, or tension. This was Mid-America, and deep in the earth for miles and miles around the central area of Chicago, the Machine throbbed and worked, infallibly producing and delivering for the comfort and well-being of these people.

Twenty-four hours a day it served them, a slave of inconceivable magnitude. It awoke them gently from a sleep made deep and dreamless by electronic impulses projected from outlets at their bedsides. It delivered their breakfasts—food grown in vast subterranean hydroponic gardens and processed with mechanical exactitude that was perfection. It provided them with every facility for amusement and physical or mental exercise and stimulation.

If they fell ill, this was recorded instantly in some great recording room where the particular wavelength of every citizen was on file. The location was ascertained by multiple finders and gentle Casualty-Robots were dispatched to carry them to the nearest mechanically operated hospital.

Year after year, decade after decade, the Machine functioned tirelessly. And as I walked down the street in Chicago, the thought came, warm and comforting: It functions for me! There is nothing to fear!

A vacation. That was it! What I needed was a few days in Florida Gardens. That would put me right. I would go to Florida.

THE ONLY requirement was the decision to act. I turned the next corner and made my way toward the central terminal. A tube car had just

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left from the Florida Express platform, but immediately another came soundlessly forward to take its place. I entered and took a seat in the lounge and picked up the latest copy of a picture-news magazine.

The magazine was a perfect example of the ultimate in pictorial and reportorial art. As no citizen or band of citizens cared to labor over such a periodical, it was issued by the Machine itself as a service to Mid-America, the photos coming from the automatic cameras set up in hundreds of thousands of spots throughout the nation—its copy written by the photo-electric interpretation-robots somewhere in the earth.

But the magazine did not interest me at the moment and I leaned back and closed my eyes. I must have dozed for a few minutes, because when I opened my eyes, I was in Florida and the speaker-robot from the terminal platform was suggesting:

"There are excellent accommodations open at the Ocean View Hotel. If you prefer rest and seclusion, there are the bungalows available at the Copley Retreat. Local car Number Four. Please watch your step."

I went directly to the information booth and spoke into one of the transmitters. "Is there any message for Lorn Morrison? 27yj459x?"

The Machine had found, from tests, that the modulated, young-female voice was the most soothing. The words came back to me, gentle, friendly, warm. "Just one moment, Mr. Morrison. I will check for you." Then, "I am sorry. There is no message."

I turned away. But an odd humor seized me. I felt the urge to do a senseless thing—something that had probably not been done ten times in two hundred years. I returned to the transmitter and said, "Thank you very much."

A passerby heard me and turned in wonder as I stood there, but I scarcely noticed the man's justified surprise. My mind was intent upon the question of whether the Machine had an answer for such a useless courtesy or whether I would be ignored.

There was a pause, a moment of dead silence as though the mechanism were at a complete loss. Then the words came back: "You are entirely welcome, sir."

And was I wrong in feeling the reply to have even more of a human quality than the previous, perfect robot-words? Probably, I thought. After all, the Machine was a soulless mechanism built by man to serve him. I was merely a fool who was still walking around under the spell of a book he had written. A fool who had better snap out of it and start thinking healthier thoughts or he'd soon find himself under observation in the mental ward of the closest hospital.

I boarded the local car and was soon stretched on a lounge in one of the bungalows at the Copley Retreat. I closed my eyes and breathed the pure air fed in through the ventilators by the Machine.

As my brain slowed down and the electric impulses therefrom lengthened, the Service-Robot took note and the music permeating the room drifted to a whisper of violins and faded completely.

I slept.

But soon a young-female voice awakened me gently, saying, "Mr. Lorn Morrison. Please call at Room 21, Building 8, in Chicago. This concerns your latest book, *Silence on the Wind*. Mr. Lorn Morrison, please acknowledge for the records."

"Message received," I mumbled.

But this time I did not say thank you. Again the fear was in me. Something extraordinary had happened

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and I was involved in it.

I was afraid.

* * *

AROUND me, man of the future, I can feel the quivering agony of the dying Machine. The Workers wander—dazed and dull-eyed—up and down the shining corridors of growing desolation. The minor Scientists stare blankly at reostats, dynamos, and atomic power packs that inexplicably refuse to function.

The Machine is expiring, but that, tomorrow's man, is not the great tragedy. The death of the Machine is only a by-product of this colossal folly. Read carefully, that this folly may not one day become yours.

* * *

WHEN GIDEON LEE, the great scientist—the Father of the Machine—died in the year 2155, there was great mourning throughout the nation. The Music-Robot played his favorite songs, and busts were erected in public places. A week later, the transportation-Robot, one of the greatest facets of the Machine and a major triumph of Lee's brain, began functioning smoothly and the people forgot their sorrow in the thrill of traveling from New York to Los Angeles in nineteen and a quarter minutes.

UPON THE morning following the receipt of the message, I boarded a tube-car for Chicago and presented myself in Room 21, Building 8.

It appeared to be an entirely useless room in that there was no furniture save one straight-backed chair; no cigarette vendor; only four bare walls and a low ceiling. There was no signal button I could press so I had nothing to do but stand and wait.

But not a long wait. Almost at once a door opened in what had appeared to be the solid rear wall of the room. A young woman was standing inside. She said, "Good morning, Mr. Morrison. Would you please step inside?"

Mutely I obeyed and discovered "inside" to be a chromium walled corridor so long as to become lost in the distance; greatly like a perspective painting of a railroad track so dear to the hearts of art students—the track diminishing to a vanishing point far away.

The young woman was quite attractive—dark of hair and eyes—and she wore a rather contour-revealing uniform of blue material. However, I got the impression that the main purpose of the uniform was freedom of movement and utility rather than an attempt to make the female form attractive.

She regarded me from under long lashes with neither shyness nor any great cordiality; but rather pensively as though I were just another problem in an endless string of problems; something to be solved and disposed of.

Now she smiled. "My name is Lorraine Dillon, Mr. Morrison. We were notified of your coming and I have instructions to help you acclimate yourself and to answer your questions; to show you around and make you feel at home."

Questions. I had one on the tip of my tongue: "You said *we*, Miss Dillon. It is—Miss?"

She nodded.

"You said *we*. Just what does the term encompass?"

"Why—we, the Machine, of course."

"Of course," I replied. "How stupid of me."

"Not in the least stupid," she returned with deep seriousness. "Your mind is full of questions and it's my job to answer them. That particular

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answer told you nothing—"

She stopped and stood regarding me in that odd abstract manner that made me feel like a problem in calculus. Then she spoke with decision.

"It might expedite matters if you understood certain basic conditions immediately. First, my mind is highly trained, as yours will no doubt also be trained. I know, by coming in contact with your brain waves, the exact extent of your ignorance concerning the underground picture, so to speak—the area in which the Machine has the greater part of its bulk and operation."

"In that case you can probably bring my knowledge up to the required minimum without my bothering to ask questions!"

HER LOOK became slightly more personal and definitely more quizzical. But when she spoke there was no more warmth in her voice than before. I was still something on a drafting board.

She said, "Your mental makeup and approach are admirable. They would be, of course, but I hadn't expected such an excellent emotionless grasp. I wonder why you were sent for?"

This last certainly uncovered emotion on my part. "You don't—*know* why I was brought here?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"But you knew I was coming."

"Certainly. I was sent to receive you."

I had no reply immediately forthcoming and there was a moment of silence, after which Lorraine Dillon said, "First I'd better show you to your quarters. We can step into a tube-car if you wish, but they are only a short distance down the hall."

"Then we might as well walk."

She started down the hallway with a long lithe stride that suggested complete competence, and I fell into step beside her. After a few paces, she glanced over at me and said, with deep seriousness:

"Concerning your previous observation concerning questions—my reaction is in the negative. Regardless of my visualization into your mind, it is still better that you ask any questions that come to you. An answer to a question reacts more sharply into the memory than information given without specific request. You see, after an inquiry, the mind waits to receive an answer and the attention is sharper. Whereas—"

"That's quite understandable," I cut in with an abruptness I immediately regretted. "I wonder if you would tell me what your duties are—ah, how you fit in down here?"

"I am a Brain-Wave Specialist, a Scientist—Minor of course. There are no Majors left as we have no need of them. I understand the functionings but not the principles governing or creating those functionings—"

"In other words, you have never been privileged to study directly under God."

She did not break stride, but she turned her head and her large dark eyes were upon me. They could have been rightly described as limpid pools of loveliness. But in this atmosphere and under these conditions, such a compliment seemed the absolute height of asininity.

"It will be a little more difficult than I thought," she said.

"I don't understand."

"I should have known that it would be, from reading your last book."

This startled me. "Do you mean *Silence on the Wind?*"

She nodded.

"Then it *was* published?"

"Yesterday afternoon. It was required reading down here. I found a copy when I went off duty."

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I SMILED unconsciously, then felt her eyes upon my face. I think I flushed slightly just before her maddeningly abstract observation:

"That bolsters your ego, doesn't it?"

There was no accusation or contempt in her tone. It was as though she'd said: "If you touch an electric wire to the body of a dead frog, its leg will kick."

I back-tracked hurriedly. "You just said it would be more difficult and I told you I didn't understand."

"You have a streak of cynical humor in your personality that insists upon expression."

"That's—bad?"

"Yes—in that it tends to dull the perceptions and also serves as a mental buffer against certain unattractive truths."

"And what about unattractive untruths. Doesn't a sense of humor then become an asset?"

She regarded me somberly. "Untruths are illusions. They do not exist."

My sigh was gusty with exasperation. "Thanks for putting me straight. I always thought they did."

Our conversation was broken off at this point as she turned away from me toward the wall and separated a light-beam switch that opened a door. "Welcome to your quarters," she said, with a dead sobriety that reminded me of a little girl speaking the lines of a poem she did not understand.

"Thank you."

She insisted that I precede her, then followed me inside and the door closed silently after us. It was a fairly large, pleasant room with every convenience to be found in the upper world.

The girl looked at me with a trifle of uncertainty, then stepped to the wall. "This might please you," she said, and pressed a button whereupon a small bookcase swung into view. Upon it were three volumes. My novels. I smiled.

"It does please you."

I made no effort to keep from frowning. "Of course it pleases me! Why do you think I wrote them?"

"I supposed you did it as a service which only you were able to perform for the people."

I was beginning—in a vague way—to understand the beautiful Lorraine Dillon and unconsciously allowed my unspeakable emotions to burst forth. I reached forward and took both of her hands in mine. My smile was far from impersonal. I said:

"Hello, Lorraine. It's wonderful to know you. Down in Florida the moon is shining over the palm trees and a lot of girls are being kissed. Would you like to be kissed?"

She bit her red lower lip and seemed to be contemplating using another thumb tack in order to hold me on the drafting board. She did not draw her hands away, but that was no compliment. They could as well have been lying in her lap.

She said, "You are in error. The moon will not rise over Florida for another five hours and ten minutes. As to your question: The answer is no. I have no need for any such stimulation as I have no desire whatsoever to reproduce."

"Yipe!"

I HEARD the exclamation croaked out and realized that it came from me as I backed hastily away from her.

Her eyes grew larger and she seemed to be probing frantically into my mind. "Are you ill?"

"No. There is nothing wrong with me I can't cure by adjusting my brain-waves." I dropped into a

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chair and signalled for a cigarette. It came out of the wall and I pulled deeply of the smoke. "I hope you'll pardon my rudeness, Miss Dillon. It was merely my way of discovering abstract truths. Won't you sit down?"

"You have a most interesting brain pattern," she said as she accepted my invitation.

"Thank you. And now for some questions if you don't object."

"I'm here for that purpose."

"First, neither of us knows why I'm here so there's no use probing in that direction. But it comes to my mind that I expected to find no other humans. I was wrong. Tell me about the people underground."

"There are the Minor Scientists and the Workers."

"Why are they here?"

"In order to perform certain duties relative to the Machine. In order to cooperate, in a small way, in its work."

"You aren't scanning my brain very well or you'd know my question wasn't slanted in that direction."

"Oh—I see. We are here because we want to be; because none of us can visualize a worse fate than living away from the Machine. The Machine did not order us here and it does not compel us to stay. Ours is a labor of love as yours will be."

"How can you say that when you don't know why I'm here?"

"Because I *do* know this—that nothing is holding you. You are entirely free to return to the surface at any moment you choose."

"How many people are underground?"

"Forty-three, all told. The number never changes. If a death occurs, the deceased is replaced."

"Who am I replacing?"

"No one. My statement was not quite true as I did not include you. There are now forty-four. You are the first addition to the crew since it reached its norm one hundred and fifty years ago."

"That's quite interesting, isn't it?"

"Extremely so."

"Why do you *think* I was summoned?"

"I never conjecture. It is a waste of time. There are not enough components to form a workable equation. Therefore no answer can be forthcoming."

"Will I meet the other people?"

"If you wish. You are free to come and go as you please. You are not to be restricted in any way."

"From whom did you receive your orders concerning me?"

"From the Machine, of course."

I stopped a moment to ponder this and the girl arose from her chair. "If you have no more questions at the moment might I suggest you get some rest and allow your brain to assimilate your fresh knowledge. In the morning I will take you on a tour of the Machine."

"Do you think the Machine will talk to me?"

"I'm sure it will—when it is quite ready."

"It will give me my orders also?"

"I presume it will."

I SUDDENLY realized what I was trying to do—to annoy this girl, to break through what appeared to be a pose, to find the human being underneath. So far I had not succeeded.

"Would you object to telling me what I am thinking about at the moment?"

"Certainly not. You are debating whether or not to kiss me. You are rather vaguely wondering what my

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reaction would be."

"What would it be?"

"There would be no reaction whatever. I think I told you the reason."

"Have I offended you?"

"Of course not. From some cause I can't determine, you resent me even though I am entirely sincere in every way. Perhaps I should apologize."

"I'm the one who should beg forgiveness, Miss Dillon."

"I suggest you call me Lorraine. It makes for greater efficiency of speech. I will call you Lorn, as will everyone else you meet."

"Thank you. And now, with your permission I believe I'll rest and assimilate knowledge."

"That will be wise," she said solemnly. "Good afternoon." The door opened as she stepped toward it and then closed silently behind her.

I dropped to the lounge and stared at the spot she had vacated. I don't know whether it could be classed as assimilating knowledge, but I certainly wanted to do a little thinking. I lay back, threw an arm over my eyes, and tried to do it in orderly fashion as seemed to befit this strange new world into which I had been drawn.

My first reaction was one of shame. I flushed visibly at the thought of having treated Lorraine Dillon badly; of having conducted myself as a first class fool. When spoken, my quips had sounded clever in my own ears. Now they seemed utterly boorish.

I probed for reasons. Had I been trying to impress the girl, or had I been trying to act the way I thought a popular novelist should act? I couldn't decide.

My mind drifted to another curious thing: The sudden vanishing of my fear. This amazed me. I conceded, now, that I had obeyed the summons of the Literary-Robot with all the alacrity of a man approaching his own execution. Yet when I'd stepped through the wall of Room 21, Building 8, the fear had fallen away from me like a shadow from the face of the sun.

Why? Had I unconsciously drawn courage from the imperturbable Miss Dillon? I thought not. Rather, my new-found surety came from another source. One I could sense all around me. It was as though I had entered the aura of some mighty presence; as though the very air about me was charged with unseen power.

Somehow it was as if I had suddenly awakened from the half-doze of my previous existence and for the first time was truly alive. I suddenly wanted to go and find Lorraine Dillon and tell her about it.

This flash of the callow youth in me soon passed but it gave rise to another thought: She had said I was entirely free—that no obstructions would be placed in my path. What greater opportunity could a man ask? I, Lorn Morrison, had been brought underground. Around me lay the fabulous mystery of the Machine. I could come and go as I pleased. Then what was I waiting for?

IN THE WORLD above, man of tomorrow, knowledge of their fate is even now beginning to dawn upon the people. They are beginning to sense the bone-chilling cold of an awful loneliness. A stark terror. They are beginning to realize that the coastal defenses are no more. That savagery from the outer world will soon stalk this land with impunity. They are beginning to sense the Great Betrayal, future man. Read carefully, that some day you also are not betrayed.

* * *

The heart of the Machine extends

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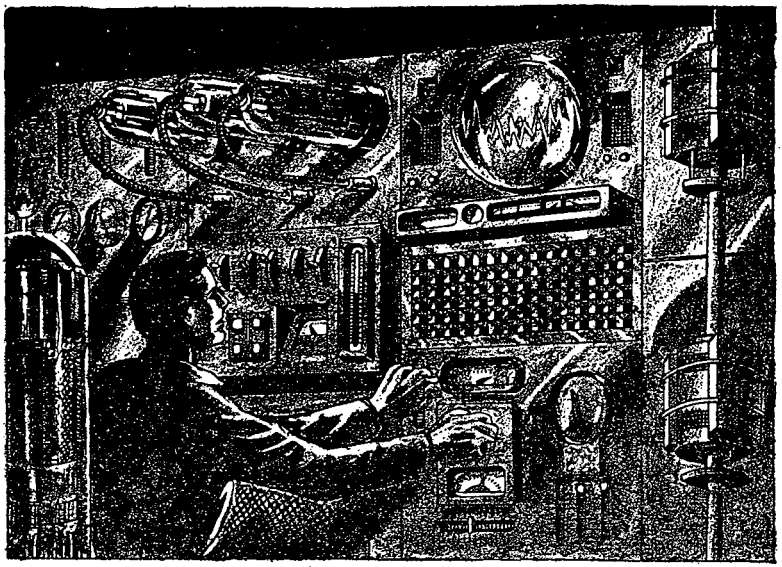

ninety-seven-and-one-quarter miles from the surface of the earth downward. Its core has a diameter of one hundred and seventeen miles at the widest point. Fourteen billion, seven hundred and eighteen million, two hundred and fifty-one thousand, nine hundred and eighteen feet of copper wire was used in its construction. It contains over seven hundred million electrical relays; almost as many fuses and converters. One tenth of its area is used in manufacturing parts it replaces within itself. It continually manufactures and dismantles a force of moving robots which see to this work of replacement. These are apart from the huge stationary Robots, each of which operates one particular function of the Machine. These Robots—to name a few—are titled: Transportation, Music, Literary, Nutrition, Planning, Construction, and Maintenance. There are many more. They operate under two sub-heads: Functional and Executive. The heart of the Functional is the huge atomic power plant at the very bottom of the Machine. This power plant is encased in a circular furnace wall. The walls are of lead, nineteen feet in thickness. All tasks not performed by robots are done by forty-three people who ask nothing more than to tend the Machine. Their duties are automatic and run in established channels. There is no need of creative Scientists to further perfect the Machine. It is perfection in itself....

THE ABOVE is a sketchy resume of the foreword in a book I found shortly after I left my quarters and began wandering through the Machine. The book lay on a shelf beside a chromium fuse box at the intersection of two hallways. How it got there I did not know. It had no by-line and I presumed it was written by the Machine itself. I debated taking the book with me. Then I decided to return for it after I'd grown tired of exploring. It seemed

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to contain the answers to many of my questions.

I walked up one hallway and down the next and I had never in my life been encompassed by such self-sufficient solitude. I almost used the word *desolation*, but it would not have expressed my feeling correctly. There were endless rooms off the shining, stainless steel hallways. I wandered into these to find—here a group of pumps working in perfect interlocking rhythm—there perhaps a single huge electric switch throwing off and on as though it had a mind of its own; perhaps a glassed-over wall covered with brass screws in no pattern whatever, but each connected to another by a thin copper wire.

This maze of seemingly aimless mechanical construction continued mile after mile until the fabulous and fantastic grew monotonous and the wonder of it was bludgeoned from my mind by the continued impact of the impossible.

Then I moved, unknowing, to within inches of swift and terrible death.

I had roamed the length of a long, silent corridor and had come upon something different in the way of scenery: a large circular room with a high conical ceiling. I stepped into this room and found myself up against a waist-high, steel railing. My corridor had fed into the room at a level close to the ceiling so that I stood looking down into an immense pit below.

The entire room was functional, its walls made up of bright, seemingly polished machinery of a repetitious and orderly pattern. From beneath some glass covered cones on the pit-floor below was exuded an electric-blue light from the flashing arcs within. This bathed the entire room in an unreal, ghostly radiance.

I was standing with hands on the railing, looking downward, when some instinct warned me of danger. It was pure instinct, because I had heard no sound. I whirled and dodged, just in time to keep from being shoved over the railing and down to my death below.

A hand, aimed for my back, shot over my shoulder. In the weird blue light, it was a horrible hand, the fingers stiff and clutching. It passed by my cheek so close each individual hair upon the back of it stood out as though under a microscope.

Acting solely for self-preservation, I twisted around and grasped the body of the man behind me and his face was thrust into mine; a gaunt and cadaverous face that was nothing more, at first glance, than green tinged skin drawn taut over the bones beneath it; that and a pair of eyes that stared and yet gave no indication of seeing.

I grasped the man's wrist, tilted backwards until I had leverage and then hurled him away from me, back into the corridor entrance. He hit the steel floor in a prone position and slid several feet along its polished surface until he came to a halt.

I followed him. If there was going to be a struggle, I wanted it to take place in the corridor well away from the yawning pit.

AS I ADVANCED upon him, the man made no move to get up and repeat his attack. He sat leaning against his hands, his back stiff, those empty eyes staring up at me.

I could only hesitate, wondering if the man was overcome with consternation at having failed to jam me over the railing. I stood well clear of him in case his bewilderment was but a ruse and his intention was to hurl himself at my legs.

But he made no such move. He said, "You're Lorn Morrison, aren't you?"

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I replied, with some belligerence, that I was.

He lifted a hand and passed it over his face as though trying to wipe cobwebs from his brain. As he did so, he whispered, "I'm sorry—damned sorry. I—I don't understand it. It's beyond all comprehension. It seems I went suddenly mad."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Blane Doyle. I am a Minor Scientist. I don't understand this at all."

"Well, if you don't understand it, you certainly can't expect me to. You tried to kill me, man!"

He was getting slowly to his feet, the dazed expression not having cleared one whit. "I know. I saw you standing there—and then the whole Machine seemed to shudder under my feet." His words were not really directed toward me. He was looking into my face and yet was talking to himself as though he needed the comfort of his own voice to sustain him.

"No," he went on, "not like that exactly. No physical upheaval. It was mental, intangible—as though the air about me was heaved in all directions by a monstrous retching. You've heard of men reacting strangely to high altitudes? Sometimes violently? That's how it was. I saw you standing there and then this—this condition came about. I hurled myself at you, somehow through fear. That was it. I was suddenly filled with terror."

He slumped against the wall and again rubbed a hand across his forehead. "Can you forgive me? Trust me? Forget this terrible thing I just did?"

I studied him closely. His contrition certainly appeared genuine. Either he was sincere or he belonged in the upper world among the Actors. I didn't want to be a gullible fool, but neither could I stand there all day. I stepped forward warily and held out my hand. After all, he stacked up as a rather elderly and fragile man and I decided I could handle him if this were a ruse of some sort.

"It's all right, Doyle," I said "Quite all right."

"We use first names down here," he said, absently, his mind still on his own problems. "I'll call you Lorn."

"Certainly—Blane. I'm sure you're quite recovered now. Maybe you should return to your quarters and rest. These things just—happen, I guess."

His eyes now centered upon me and seemed to record an image for the first time. "That's not true. Don't you see? Can't you understand? Things like this *don't* happen. In all the history of the Machine, nothing like this ever happened before. *It never happened before.*"

The man obviously needed some sort of comforting. It was certainly no time to get into an argument. "Fine, and let's proceed on the belief that it will never happen again. Come. Let's move on up the corridor. This blue light hurts my eyes."

I DROPPED my wariness now, as there appeared to be no need of it. He walked along beside me, his shoulders bent, his feet shuffling, until I slapped him on the back.

"Come—come! It's not as bad as all that. It's over and done with. You can be sure I'll never mention it to anyone."

"That's good of you, but it makes no difference. The incident is already recorded in the Brain Files."

This gave me a lead, a way to draw him off his troubles. "The Brain Files. They are of great interest to me. I wonder if you'd tell me about them?"

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Whether or not Doyle had the mind reading talents of Lorraine Dillon was not apparent. He rose to the bait and asked, "What do you wish to know?"

"I understand they contain the brain pattern of every human being in Mid-America."

"Not every one. A child is not required to sit for a brain pattern until he has reached the age of twelve. Then at twenty-three there is another sitting and the first pattern is discarded."

I knew all that of course, having complied with the ruling myself. "In what form are the records kept?"

"On silver wire. They are superimposed again and again. Any brain pattern can be drawn out by the vibration of its code number in a matter of seconds. The entire file is nothing more than a role of silver wire some twenty thousand feet long."

Doyle was still showing signs of weakness. He stepped to the corridor wall and a panel slid open. "If you don't mind," he said, "we'll take a chair-car back to the central building. I don't feel quite up to a long walk."

A double-seat car slid out of a small garage, turned itself in the direction we'd been walking, and came to a stop. We got into it and the car started off.

"Does—does it know where we want to go?"

"Of course. I just told it we wanted to go to the central building."

"So you did. Just how is it equipped to respond?"

"I haven't the least idea," Doyle replied. "My work does not impinge on that phase of the Machine in any way."

There was a moment or two of silence, during which Doyle seemed to become aware of my surprise. "You see," he hastened to explain, "each of the persons privileged to serve the Machine considers himself—so to speak—a part of it." He stopped and appeared to be thinking. "Yes, that's it. Although I never analyzed it before, that's the situation. Each part of the Machine has a function to perform. For instance, one particular transformer among an infinite number does a specific job. To oversimplify, it neither knows nor cares what the other transformers do. It knows only that they will perform their various duties just as it will perform its own specific duty."

"And it's the same way with the people?"

"Exactly."

"What is your duty?"

"I patrol a route of Basic Generators."

"You merely patrol the route?"

"I check the wave-length of each brush to discover if it is worn down."

"And if it is?"

"I inform the Machine."

I was so deeply interested in the workings here underground that I completely ignored tact. "Isn't that something that could be done by a robot?"

Doyle, however, did not appear in the least offended. "I don't know. I would say that the fact that I am doing it precludes the possibility of a robot being able to perform the work."

"I see." But I did not agree with Doyle. Common sense indicated the work to be of the simplest nature. A robot could have certainly done it. Then why Doyle?

FOR WANT of a better explanation, I decided that the Machine chose to keep a certain human quota within itself. This quota, from what I had seen, could be either simple-minded or intelligent. Witness the sharp mind of Lorraine Dillon, and that of a so-called Minor Scientist,

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Doyle, who did not even know what made a chair-car function.

Another facet of the riddle occurred to me. I stated that Lorraine Dillon was certainly higher in intelligence than Doyle. But only, so far as I had discovered, relative to her own personal work which had to do with the Brain Files. It was entirely possible that she was as ignorant of other underground workings as Doyle seemed to be.

And now a fresh incident intruded itself to take my mind away from abstract reasoning. It seemed to me a minor incident.

The chair-car came to a halt. That was all.

But it wasn't a small thing so far as Doyle was concerned. For a moment he sat staring blankly ahead. Then his eyes widened and his jaw dropped from sheer consternation.

"It stopped!" he said.

"So it did. Have we arrived at the central building?"

"No. We haven't traveled even half the distance."

"Then what do we do? Get out and walk?"

He turned his head slowly until his eyes were fixed upon mine. "But you don't understand!"

This annoyed me. Did Doyle think I hadn't enough mental grip to conceive of an ordinary car coming to an ordinary halt?

"What is there to understand?"

"The car stopped. Such a thing has never before happened!"

"You mean these things move endlessly?"

There was a look of fear and pleading on his face. "Please do not indulge in humor."

"I wasn't aware that I was so indulging."

"Please try to grasp it! I told the car to take us to the central building. It did not do so. It did not obey me."

"But it's obeying you now." I spoke just after the car went again into motion. We were moving smoothly down the corridor as before.

"But—but it shouldn't have stopped!"

All this was fast becoming a distinct frustration to me. I didn't try to hide my frown. "Mr. Doyle—I mean Blane—allow me to present my thoughts in the simplest terms. What just happened seems to me most trivial. A chair-car came to a momentary halt while traveling down a corridor. It frightened you. Therefore it must be of importance. Now tell me—just what world-shaking event does the stoppage foretell?"

"I don't know."

"Then why worry? It is certainly a minor error."

"You don't seem to grasp it as I do. A minor thing, certainly, but a mistake nonetheless—and it never happened before. In the Machine, Lorn, *there is no margin for error.*"

I was beginning to tire of the subject. "An error *did* occur and without disastrous results. Therefore we must assume there *is* a margin for error."

Doyle thought that over. "But the other—my actions back at the Valve Crypt?"

"Also explainable," I said. "After all, you are human—not a steel mechanism. Such things happen to humans."

"Are you sure? Tell me, when and where did such an attack seize a human being in the last two hundred years?"

I would have responded sharply, but at that moment the car came to another halt. Evidently nothing was amiss however, because Doyle quitted the car and I followed him. Immediately the vehicle moved on down the corridor to stop suddenly and turn to a position at right angles with

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the wall. A panel slid back and the car disappeared beyond it.

"I'm very tired," Doyle said, with a weak smile. "I wish you would excuse me. I believe I need a rest."

"I think it's a good idea."

WITHOUT another word, the harrassed man walked away and out of sight into a cross-corridor. I stood looking after him. If he is a Minor Scientist, I thought, what sort of mentality will I find among the Workers?

I moved up the corridor seeking the location of my quarters. This I did by watching for the number—22—I'd seen previously over the door. I found it, went inside, and began pacing the room.

In truth, I was not nearly as undisturbed over the car-stoppage incident as I'd appeared to be. In itself, it had bothered me not at all, but its effect on Doyle kept preying on my mind. The man had been frightened—almost terrorized. What lay behind the terror? Had his simple explanation been the true one?

I thought that probably it had, so far as he'd been able to explain it. Now I remembered, and pondered upon my own fear when the Literary Robot had neglected to deliver my books; when, instead, the cryptic note had spewed forth from the rejection slot.

I remembered the haste with which I had sought an alcoholic buffer and the unpleasant night I'd spent at the Florida Gardens. Could I have explained my fear to anyone making inquiry? No. Then why had I been so critical of Doyle? I decided I owed the man an apology. Even though he had tried to kill me—

I whirled at the instinctive feeling of a presence in the room and discovered Lorraine Dillon standing inside the doorway. It was my desire to resent her silent entrance and to make my resentment known to her. But this I could not do. I was distinctly glad to see her.

She started to speak, then bit back the words, her white teeth against her lower lip. "He tried to push you into a Valve Crypt?"

She spoke exactly as though I'd just finished telling her about it, and the effect of her words can only be described as weird. I remembered instantly her mind-scanning talent and realized I could as well have spoken of the incident as to have had it on the tip of my brain, so to speak, when she entered.

"Your mind reading ability is devilishly disconcerting at times," I said.

"I'm sorry. It was rude of me. But—it really happened?"

"It happened, but no harm was done. I'm pretty agile when the necessity arises. Blane had some sort of mental spasm. He recovered almost immediately."

"But why did he have—a mental spasm, as you call it?"

I stared at the girl levelly. "Let *me* say it this time. I'm beginning to get the hang of it: *In the entire history of the Machine, nothing like that has ever happened before.*"

"That's quite correct. But it doesn't seem to disturb you much."

"It doesn't. Should it?"

THE EYES that were beginning to haunt me gave back my stare, but Lorraine had no words. I said, "Possibly it's because I don't know anything about the Machine. My situation is probably that of a fool in paradise—a baby sitting on the edge of a cliff."

Still she did not speak and I babbled on. "I know nothing about the Machine, but from what I've gathered so far—neither does anyone else down here. Why don't you say some-

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thing?"

"There was another incident."

I wondered if she'd dragged the chair-car episode out of my mind. This was not the case, however. "One of the Minor Scientists, William Kensing, was struck."

"More violence."

"He was struck by a cigarette vendor. He was seated in his quarters and had reached for a cigarette. But instead of handing it to him, the vending arm came out and struck him savagely in the eye."

I made an honest effort to hold back, but the laughter insisted upon expression. I threw back my head and indulged in unrestrained guffaws until I again caught Lorraine's solemn expression as she stood regarding me.

"Perhaps," I said, "it's the Machine's way of telling William he should give up smoking."

My discomfort became suddenly acute. I felt a little like a man who had told an off-color joke at a prayer meeting.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Truly sorry. I will present myself for punishment."

I sat down on the lounge and reached out to break the electronic beam of the vendor. Instantly the slot opened. I saw Lorraine lean forward in alarm and heard her quick exclamation. "Be careful, Lorn! Be careful!"

But the Refreshment Robot was evidently out of its eye-punching mood. The arm handed me my cigarette and disappeared. "Would you care for one?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I wonder why you were sent for. I wonder why you're here."

"Possibly to cheer the place up a little. I play a fair piano when urged."

Her teeth bit deep into her lip, a characteristic gesture I'd grown to expect and to watch for. "I don't understand you at all," she said. Then she turned and left my quarters.

It was with distinct regret that I watched her go. After a few moments I followed her into the corridor but she was nowhere in sight. I was just turning back, when I remembered the book I wanted to read. The place wasn't far away and I hurried down the hall, thinking that I'd have liked to have seen the expression on William Kensing's face when the vending arm popped him in the eye.

I found the place I'd left the book. I examined the surroundings and was sure I hadn't gone astray. But the book was missing. It had vanished from the shelf on which I'd placed it. Slowly I retraced my steps, somewhat annoyed. I'd had every intention of spending the hours before bed time in a close study of the Executive branch of the Machine. Evidently someone else had seen the book in passing and had picked it up. I returned to my quarters and ordered a substantial dinner.

* * *

BEAR WITH ME, man of the future. Sad it is that I, Lorn Morrison, am not a Dickens, a Tolstoy, a Balzac. The Golden Age was not conducive to the flowering of genius. The Golden Age was designed for Man's comfort, amusement; his entertainment. Genius is not formed under such velvet conditions.

I am doing my best in the writing of this narrative. I am shudderingly conscious of its importance. Yet, as I reread what I have written, the words seem light, trivial. A thread of humor and frivolity seems woven into the story; a thread that mocks me; that says: You Morrison, are a mediocrity—a true product of the Golden Age—and thus not capable of telling this grim and horrible tragedy.

That is true. I am but a school child trying to do the work of a Dos-

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toevsky. But I can only do my best. So bear with me, man of the future, and do not charge off what I have written as a light and frivolous bit of fiction.

* * *

THE MACHINE had two basic beginnings: The beginning of the mechanism itself—and the beginning of a need for it, if the term "need" can rightly be used.

The mechanism began taking form on that unrecorded day, thousands of years ago, when the First Genius —wearing an animal skin and carrying a club—discovered the wheel.

The beginning of the need was a little more gradual. It covered a longer period. The need was formed as men of olden times began regarding luxuries as necessities; when cosmetics became as important to women as the proper nourishment of their children; when a man's tobacco became as much of a necessity as a pair of shoes; when a video plate became a thing more to be desired than a comfortable bed upon which to sleep.

When luxuries became necessities, the need for the Machine was born.

I AWOKE the following morning into a sense of great expectancy. This, I was sure, would be the day. Possibly before bedtime the Machine would speak to me! I had no idea, of course, in what form this "speaking" would become manifest. It could be in any of several ways. Perhaps orally through an electronic-manifest; perhaps I would be contacted mentally. Or, possibly—as it had been with the Literary Robot from which I'd gotten my summons—the words would be sent in the form of a written message.

I was pondering all this, while I showered and shaved. Then, a short time later, there came another of those annoying lapses that would no doubt have struck fear into Blane Doyle. I had ordered breakfast from the Nutrition Robot, clad the while in a dressing gown provided the night before by the Service Robot, which had also delivered the toiletries I needed. I had also sent out my entire wardrobe—the clothing I wore—for cleaning and laundering.

After breakfast, I signalled for its return. It was delivered, in perfect condition, through the valet slot, and I proceeded to dress for the day. Almost finished, I stopped and gaped into the mirror.

The necktie was not mine.

I scowled at the strip of blue cloth I'd just formed into a knot around my neck. The tie I'd sent to the Service Robot had been dark red of background with a small black design woven into the fabric. The one returned to me was a solid sky blue—more attractive no doubt than the other one, but still not my necktie.

Instantly the logical thought-sequence flashed into my mind. I caught it up almost savagely, refusing—after having been almost contemptuous of Blane Doyle—to react exactly as he had reacted the day before. Doggedly, I reformed the thought-sequence:

When, I asked myself, will one of these trivial errors be repeated so it cannot be said—*this is the first time in the history of the Machine that such a thing ever happened?* I refused to give sanctuary to the vague fear rising again within me, and forced my thinking into sardonic channels. Take the stoppage of the chair-car on the previous day. Would a second, third, or fourth stoppage establish a new norm which Doyle's mind could accept and recognize? I wondered about this and then thought of the solemn, beautiful face of Lorraine Dillon—heard her saying as though referring to a violation of the natural law—

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"the vending arm came out and struck him savagely in the eye."

I jerked the necktie into place and turned abruptly from the mirror. My scowl remained. This whole affair was becoming most exasperating. What was I doing in this place, anyhow? Why had I been summoned here? Was it another of these unexplainable little errors on the part of the Machine? Was it the outward result of an electronic impulse misinterpreted by the underground mechanism? Maybe someone in Mid-America had ordered honeyed figs for breakfast on the previous morning and, because of an error, the Literary Robot had acted in a fantastic manner and had ordered a single individual—out of two hundred million—to report underground.

Maybe the Machine had no more idea of what I was doing below-surface than I had!

"I'm getting a little tired of this!" I said sharply.

I don't know whether the resulting action-sequence was a result of this exclamation or not. At any rate, it developed instantly. I turned and walked out of my quarters into the corridor. I bore left and pressed a signal on the wall, whereupon a chair-car came from its garage. I got in and the car rolled off down the corridor.

AFTER TEN minutes of travel, the car stopped. I got out and without hesitation, approached a place in the wall where a door opened, allowing me entrance into a room where a group of people were gathered.

I did not count heads, but I think their number was close to ten. Some were standing about in various attitudes of helplessness. A small group of them was kneeling around the prone figure of another. Without exception, they all turned eyes upon me.

"What is the trouble here?" I asked.

No doubt I inadvertently sounded authoritative when I was merely curious—both as to what had occurred and why I had come unerringly to this place.

One man, taller than the others, got to his feet and stepped back from the still figure on the floor. "Gregory is dead," the man whispered, "and still he lies unattended on the floor."

Now the rest of the kneeling group got up and moved away from the body as though it were charged with some lethal ray. Broken snatches of information came to me from different parts of the room:

"The blood comes from a gash in his neck."

"There is also blood on the edge of the bookshelf."

"He must have signalled for a book."

"The service door opened and the shelf came out and knocked him to the floor."

"It hit him with enough force to gash his throat."

Never in the history of the Machine had a bookshelf cut the throat of a human being.

Here it was again. Sinister in its monotony.

I lifted my eyes from the body and glanced around the room. Suddenly, I felt ill at ease standing there among people I had never seen before, yet who acted exactly as though I were a lifelong acquaintance.

"My name is Lorn Morrison," I said.

The tall man held out his hand. "We were all notified of your arrival."

We shook hands. "Were any of you enlightened as to the reason for my coming?" I asked.

Their expressions were as blank as

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the empty sky. All except the tall one, who said, "My name is Bark Fleming. You can—"

"I know. I can call you Bark. We all use first names down here. Is this man dead?"

"He is dead."

"How long has he been lying here?"

No one answered. No one seemed to know.

"Where are the Casualty-Robots?"

No one answered.

"What's the matter with you people? Are you all operated by invisible wires? Aren't you human?"

No resentment flared in any of the faces. Only one of them replied. "There has never before been an accidental death. Perhaps the robots are not equipped to respond."

Another sharp exclamation welled up in my throat. But it never found expression because something of far greater importance smote me almost forcibly and there came the clear, sharp thought:

It is not they who are strange. It is you. You, Lorn Morrison, have changed. Only a few hours ago, you were no different than they. You were frightened because the green light flashed and no copies of your book were forthcoming. You have no cause to criticize these people.

THE THOUGHT-SEQUENCE was broken by the opening of the door and two Casualty-Robots wheeled noiselessly into the room. Their soft rubber-covered arms gently lifted the dead body of Gregory up from the floor. The assembled humans crowded back as the robots left the room; left it full of a silence you could have cut with a knife.

I broke the silence. "Does any one of you know where the robots take a body? Has any of you the least idea what becomes of it?"

No one had anything to say.

"Talk up, damn you!"

I could have been speaking to fence-posts. Only Bark Fleming replied. "We are all quite naturally at an utter loss—"

But even louder, through my brain, screamed the self-accusation: *Do you, Lorn Morrison, know what becomes of a dead body in this beautiful Utopian age of total freedom for every man? Have you ever cared—really cared—where your food comes from? How your pants get pressed? How your books get put together and distributed? From whence come the robots that pick you up if you fall in the gutter and put you into a hospital —that more fully understand the Hippocratic oath than any doctor who ever lived in the years long gone? Who are you to shout at your fellow drones?*

I suddenly had to get out of this room—away from these strange, ghost-like people who seemed more dead than alive in their helplessness. The door opened for me and I went blindly through it into the corridor. Far too blindly. I hurled full-tilt into Lorraine Dillon who was just entering. Instinctively, we threw our arms about each other and stood like two grotesque dancers struggling for balance. We achieved it and disengaged ourselves.

"I'm sorry. Very clumsy of me. The first time such a thing has happened, no doubt."

I saw her eyes: large, solemn, accusing. "Your humor still prevails—except now it's turning bitter."

Taking her by the arm, I started hauling her down the corridor. "Come with me."

She pulled herself from my grasp. "Don't hold my arm. I'm quite capable of walking."

"Then walk."

We moved along in silence, a strange tight silence neither of us

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found words to break until we were back in my quarters. Then Lorraine sat down on the lounge, reached for a cigarette, and asked, "Why did you bring me here?"

I paced the floor, back and forth, not breaking stride as I answered her. "I don't know. I thought I wanted to be alone, but I guess that's not true. I must want someone to talk to."

"About what?"

"About this devilish place and what's happening to me down here."

"Devilish? If you don't like it you're free to leave."

"I don't want to leave. I want to talk. Listen: Haven't you any idea whatever about who the Machine really is?"

"Your question is childish. What do you mean—*who* the Machine is? It isn't human. It's a vast impersonal mechanism; a completely self-sufficient product of the finest brains the world ever knew. Professor Gideon Lee—"

"Stop it! I know all that. Every school child in Mid-America can recite it with perfect inflection. But it's a lot of rot! The machine is *not* impersonal. It may be completely made up of steel and atoms and electricity but it's no more impersonal than God!"

"I'm afraid I don't follow your line of reasoning."

I SAT DOWN on the lounge next to her and took her hands in mine. I tried to relax and managed a smile. "Maybe I don't understand it myself, Lorraine. I guess I don't even understand Lorn Morrison any more. All I know for sure is that something's happening to me—*has* happened."

"Tell me about it, Lorn."

"I'm as different from the man who came in here yesterday as night is from day. When I answered the summons from the Literary Robot, I was just like the rest of you—the ones up above and the ones down below. Unexplainable occurrences frightened me just as they frighten you and Blane and the crowd standing around Gregory's body back in that room."

"You mean they no longer upset you at all?"

"Not in the least—except to make me mad at seeing a man cringe when a chair-car stops—at seeing the look of helplessness on their faces at sight of a dead body."

"But there has never before been an accidental death in—"

"Don't say it or I'll turn you over my knee and paddle your pretty little pink backside! I'm fed up with hearing that line of talk. I can't take any more of it."

Lorraine glanced at the door as though she expected the Casualty Robots to come in after me at any moment. "I think you need a sedative," Lorraine murmured.

I took her hands in mine. They were soft and warm. "We're as far apart as the poles, aren't we?"

Her eyes were probing—analyzing. "I can't make head or tail of you. Your mind is a whirling chaos. Has the Machine spoken to you yet?"

"I think it did. I don't know how it was accomplished, but something sent me directly to the room where Gregory was killed."

"I sent you there."

"But you arrived later than I did."

"I caught the message while I was at work. I came as soon as I could."

"Then it wasn't the Machine. That's disappointing in a way. You see—I've been forming a sort of theory."

"About what?"

"About why I was brought here. First I thought it might be another mistake, but I changed my mind. I don't know why I'm here, but it certainly isn't chance that I feel as

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though I've just been born. My mind is clearer, Lorraine, sharper and more alert than it's ever been. It's as though I'd been walking around all my life under the influence of a drug and the drug has now worn off. I've begun to ask questions—demand answers—"

"You think possibly you're being conditioned for some task—some duty?"

"That's it! You've expressed it better than I could. How else can we account for the petty fears leaving me completely? My interest in what makes the Machine work when I never cared in the least before?"

She pondered this as though it were the world's most important problem. I went on. "The point is this, Lorraine. In a sense, I am now a man with sight, walking among the blind. I *know* I am clearer-minded and more alert than they—or you. And since it has happened to me, why can't it happen to everyone else? Maybe this is the beginning of a great awakening, Lorraine, and God knows Mid-America needs an awakening."

Lorraine summed up the opposition perfectly in four words:

"I don't see why."

I FELT A sudden deep frustration and emptiness. I felt as lonely as Socrates would have felt on an island inhabited by cavemen.

And it was not conceit or ego that prompted this feeling. I was utterly sure of myself—certain of my newborn mental expansion. It was as tangible as my breathing.

But there was no use discussing it with Lorraine—nor anyone else I knew in this land of two million humans. I had become a freak and I wanted to know why.

"You'd better run along, Lorraine. I'm only boring you."

"Oh no, I enjoy listening to you."

"But you don't know what I'm talking about."

"I do in a sense, Lorn, because it hinges on brain-patterns. You refer to a complete reorientation of the electronic waves emanating from the brain tissue due to the reassembling of the nuclear rhythms resulting from shock of some sort."

"I do?"

"It could be nothing else. But you are wrong about its possibly becoming an epidemic."

"Why am I wrong?"

"It is a recognized fact that such a thing can happen in certain cases; but the cases are very rare; maybe one in half a million."

"That wouldn't be much of an epidemic, would it?"

"No. The clue is in the brain-pattern. You could hunt for weeks without finding one."

I was still holding her hands, but she didn't seem aware of the fact. "How," I asked, "can you know so much and so damn little at the same time?"

Lorraine withdrew her hands and got up from the lounge. She wore an expression of doubt and unhappiness. "I—I can't read you any more. It makes me nervous."

"You don't know what I'm thinking?"

"No."

I leered at her. "It has to do with reproduction, darling. Better run along quick, or I'll eat you for dinner."

For the first time since I'd known her, Lorraine flared. And in so doing, she was as pretty as a Roman candle against a dark sky. Her eyes widened and her nostrils flared.

"You hold us in contempt, don't you Lorn? You feel far superior to us and think you know so much more than we do! You sneer at us in our abysmal ignorance concerning the

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Machine! All right, Mr. Super-Intelligence—Mr. Cynic! Go out and learn about it for yourself! Go out and run up and down the corridors until your feet drop off! Stick your nose into every pump and battery box and generator from here down to the atomic pack and then come back and tell me all about the Machine! Tell me all its secrets and what makes it work! I'd like to know, Mr. Morrison! I'd like to know!"

Lord, but she was beautiful, standing there hating me! I drank in that beauty and heard myself saying, as usual, the wrong thing: "We use first names down here, Lorraine darling."

"That's right—we do! But 'darling' isn't a part of my first name! Please remember that. Good bye—*Mr. Morrison.*"

She went away, leaving an empty place all around me. I threw myself down on the lounge and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the metal fingers of the serving arm were patiently holding forth a cigarette.

That was strange. I hadn't signalled for it.

* * *

THERE WAS an ancient book, man of the future; a book called the Bible. God grant, in your wanderings, you come upon a copy of it, as I have no copy to leave for you. And sad it is that I cannot leave you a Bible because this narrative you read might well be called an epic of despair, while the Bible is the most magnificent book of hope ever penned.

In the book called the Bible, there are laws laid down by God Himself and given, through Moses, to the people. And God is great, man of the future. Greater than the Machine.

One of these laws from the Almighty was: "Thou shalt not have strange gods before me." That meant that the worshiping of idols was a dangerous and terrible thing to do.

And that, I think, was the basis of this whole panorama of tragedy. Because the Machine was an idol; the people's complete trust therein was a hideous form of worship.

The Bible did not state, tomorrow's man, the punishment meted out for worshiping idols. So, in a manner, this narrative supplements the Bible in that it tells of the punishment. Read well and take the lesson into your heart.

* * *

Centuries ago—while the Machine was a dream of giant minds—the affairs of the nation were conducted differently. Governments were formed among men that they could live in peace among themselves and derive the greatest good from the community life. Various forms of government went into discard until two ideologies dominated the world—Democracy and Communism. Communism was essentially a short-lived form because it drew its life-blood primarily from human want. It promised alleviation of want, but kept the promise only by spreading available supplies over an ever expanding surface and then enforced universally shorter rations with an iron mace. Democracy, upon the other hand, recognized the truth that improvement in conditions comes only from the initiative of the individual. It highlighted human freedom and in that freedom men felt the inner drive of the creative spirit. Democracy thrived and flowered. It built the Machine. The Machine is a tragic failure. Does it follow then that Democracy was wrong? No, because Democracy thrived on its own life-force—continuous dynamic achievement of the individual. The Machine

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only proved there are other ways to turn men into hollow shells—other ways than smashing them with an iron fist.

ON THE following day, Bark Fleming was killed. I witnessed his death.

I had gone to bed finally, after pacing the floor for hours mulling over Lorraine Dillon's accusations. I had certainly not been contemptuous of the others, but outward appearances must have indicated my so being. Possibly it was a result of her own bewilderment—that accusation; maybe a blind behind which she hid her own helplessness.

But thinking that, could also have been a screen behind which I was hiding my own inability to excel in social intercourse. After a long period of this mulling, I jerked myself up sharply. Why was I worrying about it? It was of no importance. None whatever. I had no interest in this girl. And basically, no interest in the other forty-two humans inhabiting this underground. Yet I was not going to evade Lorraine Dillon's challenge. I'd prowl the corridors just as she'd invited me to. And I'd find out about the Machine; more than the whole forty-three of them had learned in all the years of their service.

This last was more prophetic than I knew.

I went to bed not realizing how juvenile my thought-sequences had been. I awoke the next morning with all of it gone except the urge to investigate. I left my room as soon as possible and began wandering.

For an hour, I walked in what was probably a great circle, turning up every bisecting corridor I found. Everywhere it was the same—endless, shining emptiness; long stretches of complete silence broken, here by the hum of power surging through channels hidden behind walls of steel; there by the quiet rhythm of machinery as countless functions were fulfilled behind closed doors and bolted cover-plates.

Three times I passed robots moving on silent wheels along the corridors. I reversed my direction and followed the first one I met—a chromium platform with a lifting crane and four metal arms—evidently a Carrying-Robot. I managed to keep pace with the mechanism, but it turned suddenly within the corridor and went through a door that had opened to receive it. The door closed and when I tried to reopen it, my efforts were unsuccessful. I allowed the other two robots to pass me and go where they would.

I now realized that the tunnels I followed were not level, but were slanted slightly downward; not much, but enough to carry a man far underground in a matter of a few hours.

From whence this knowledge came, I knew not. It wasn't learned by any conscious process. It was just suddenly there in my mind, full-blown and complete: *The corridors angle gently downward and you are moving toward the Atomic Pack.* Thus my mind spoke.

So insidiously did this knowledge infiltrate my mind that I was not aware of any singularity in it for several minutes. Then I stopped suddenly, frozen by realization. The information had been given me by some source outside my brain. What source?

A QUICK wave of weakness passed over me and I was forced to lean for support against the wall of the corridor. Perspiration welled from my pores. Then there came upon me a sudden wave of nausea such as I'd never known before. I was not conscious of falling, but fall I did, because my consciousness left me and time ceased to be.

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I was trapped in a sort of whirling vacuum that held me disembodied and powerless; a horrible sensation enveloped me; a sensation with all the starkness of realism, yet it was within me to know it as a dream.

All around me floated seemingly astral entities and I knew them, in the dream, for thoughts given visible form, if that is understandable. The Machine was cut up into separate parts it seemed, and I was floating among them. There was the Power Source; the thirty-six Major Robots floating around and around in the vacuum. There was one gigantic entity which I knew as The People. This was the largest entity of all. It remained motionless and the others circled it.

Now the scene changed. The entities disappeared and the void was filled with nothing but lips—mouths floating unsupported in the space about me. Mouths speaking:

"You have been selected."

"Lorn Morrison—Lorn Morrison—Lorn Morrison."

"You are the honored one."

Laughter—laughter long and loud—hot and searing.

"The honored one," as from a chorus in a great cathedral.

"Your Brain-Pattern was right."

"One in five hundred thousand. Ha! One in ten million!"

I floated and dreamed and suffered.

"Let me speak!"

"Let him speak—speak—eak."

"I have nothing to say."

Mad laughter. "He has nothing to say."

"The Executive Force of the Machine. In a great silver vat covered over."

"The Heart of the Machine."

"The Soul of the Machine."

"The Pulse of the Machine."

"The great silver vat!"

"They misjudged!"

"The great mistake—the great mistake—the great—"

"Stop it."

"Forgive, forgive! We only came to tea!"

I realized the order to cease had been my own; that I'd shrieked out the words in my dreaming, unconscious state, and come back to wakefulness in time to hear the last echoes of it ringing down the corridor in which I lay sprawled.

Sick. I had never known such sickness, but it was not physical. Rather a sickness of the mind, clawing and ripping at the very bastions of my sanity. In a brief moment that seemed an age, my reason tottered, fought for its existence, came again to balance and—

Held.

Now all was as before. The silent, gleaming corridor stretching away; the deep-seated throbbing of a pump hidden somewhere within this steel colossus. Everything around me was as before.

But I myself had changed.

IT WAS a little as though a child of six had been allowed to develop completely into a man of fifty within a few seconds; then to turn about and see the entire process with intense clarity. I now knew many things I had not known before. I knew—without the labors of learning it—the over-all pattern of the Machine. I understood perfectly, the integration of all the minute parts into the larger parts—the large into the greater—the greater into the more vast—until the whole, breathtaking grandeur of its simplicity was in my mind.

I knew everything—yet nothing. I remembered an ancient quatrain, the source of which was lost in antiquity:

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Up from Earth's center, through the Seventh Gate,
I rose and on the throne of Saturn sate.
And many a Knot unraveled by the road;
But not the Master-knot of Human fate.

Standing there in the corridor, with all this suddenly endowed knowledge, I still asked the question: What makes the Machine work?

I did not know.

And now it came sharply upon me that I was being moved about like a pawn—motivated, pushed forward and back, by a power I did not understand. The certainty of this came as a result of sudden action on my part.

I pushed a signal in the wall and was almost as much of a robot as the chair-car that responded. I climbed in and gave the speech-vibrations necessary to send the car on its way: "Corridor 719—Fuse Cluster 17-A-6. Fast!"

The car whirled through the corridor at a speed that sent the wind singing past my ears. I gripped the safety bar and asked myself: Where am I going? What is the reason for this?

The bright steel of the corridor became a silvery blur as we rocketed along. We turned corners with neck-snapping suddenness. Then we were there. The car braked to a halt.

In a corner nearby, Bark Fleming crouched down against the floor, terror in his eyes and blood streaming from cuts and bruises on his face. A Casualty-Robot stood over him, leaning forward. Two of its arms were outspread to hold him in the trap.

The other two were systematically tearing him to pieces.

It is a chilling and terrible thing to see violence without passion—cruelty without emotion—suffering without reason. A short time before, I would have been shocked into paralysis by the sight.

I was shocked now, but still master of myself. I sprang forward and turned a small handle on the back of the robot. It sensed my presence immediately and turned to destroy me. But I anticipated its fury, ducked under the murderous rubber arm, and jerked open the small door to which the handle was riveted.

I thrust my fingers inside and grasped the silver wires of the safety fuse just as the robot hurled me away. I sailed through the air and came to a sliding halt against the far wall of the corridor. The Casualty-Robot stared at me through sightless bulb-filaments from which the fire was gone, the glow extinguished. The robot was now a motionless piece of dead machinery.

I got to my feet and hurried over to kneel beside Bark Fleming. It was too late. Bark was dead, one of the robot's arms having thrust straight into his chest, breaking bone and tearing flesh, clawing his heart to ribbons.

Nothing could be done for Bark. I straightened and passed a hand across my eyes just as the weirdest part of the performance went into enactment.

FROM SOMEWHERE down the corridor, another Casualty-Robot came into sight. It moved noiselessly forward and, as I stepped aside, it picked up the remains of Bark Fleming and returned in the direction it had come.

I knew what would happen to Bark. His body would be delivered to the observation ward of the hospital. Shining instruments would check, probe, and test him for signs

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of life. None would register on the dial under the electronic beams of the governing unit, and a signal would go out automatically for Bark's delivery to the atomic blast ovens where his remains would be turned into a fragment of charcoal.

This fragment would go into a jar bearing Bark's statistics; then into a crypt—a temporary resting place—where it would stand until all chance of Bark's relatives demanding the ashes had passed. If the ashes remained unclaimed, a time recording device would finally signal for the urn's disposal. It would be flung into an atomic furnace—to complete destruction.

All this went through my mind; and again the wonder at my newly acquired knowledge. It seemed that my brain had become a file-cabinet of inexhaustible information into which I could delve for details relative to any situation.

Glancing down at the fragments of silver wire in my fingers, I noted they were entirely too thick for their purpose. The wires of a safety valve were supposed to be extremely fragile, thus burning out at the first overload of electronic impulse. These wires could carry a load strong enough to activate ten robots.

An error. A grave error in the construction of the mechanism that now stood before me as a harmless pile of inanimate material.

Came frustration—sharp annoyance as I probed my newly acquired brain-file for an answer and found none. It seemed I had been given a great deal of information, but not all the information I wanted. I knew what the error had been, but I had not the remotest idea of how or why it had been allowed to happen. Automatically my thought-sequence slipped back into the old rut:

Never before in the history of the Machine has a man been beaten to death by a robot.

A chair-car whirred into view, stopped, and Lorraine Dillon got out. Her face was white, showing strain and tension.

"Was he—killed?"

"Yes. A robot went berserk with its safety fuse improperly built. The silver wire was too thick to melt."

She looked at me strangely.

"The Casualty-Robot took him away?"

"Yes. You look tired. We'd better go back to the central building."

LORRAINE did not object. We got into the car and I gave directions. The car began to move. Lorraine said, "You become more mysterious every time I see you."

"I'm sorry."

"You are a Novelist. You've never before been underground. Yet you know about the workings of a Casualty-Robot. I don't think there is a Minor Scientist or a Worker who knows that."

"Never mind. The important thing is that I owe you—and the rest—an apology."

"Why?"

"For ridiculing your fears. You were right—all of you. There is something vitally amiss down here."

"The mistakes have finally brought you around to that belief?"

"Not exactly. Let's say I was too stupid to be impressed by small errors. It was something else—something that happened a few minutes ago."

"Bark's death?"

"No... By the way, you didn't send for me this time, did you?"

"Not this time."

"I thought not. The Machine did it. Of that I'm certain."

"It's entirely possible."

"You remember I told you about

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feeling more alive—feeling as though I'd been going through some sort of conditioning?"

"Yes."

"A little while ago I had a terrible mental upset. It must have been similar to what Blane went through just before he attacked me at the Valve-Crypt—yet not entirely the same."

"What was the difference?"

"His, I think, was accidental—another mistake of the Machine. Mine was planned—mine wasn't a mistake."

"Are you sure it was entirely mental?"

"Yes. I fainted—passed out completely—and went through a nightmare. But when I came out of it, things were entirely different in my mind."

"Different in what way?"

"I was somehow taught a great many things; how it was accomplished I don't know, but now I'm sure I know more about the Machine than any other living soul."

"Is that how you found out about the Casualty-Robots?"

"Not consciously—not with any knowledge of learning. But when I needed the knowledge, it was there in my mind. It was part of what had been given to me."

Lorraine seemed to accept this with some doubt. "What—what else do you know?"

"It would take hours to tell you. I have a complete concept of the Machine; enough working knowledge of it to fill volumes. I could sit down and write authoritatively about the Machine for the rest of my life."

"Do you suppose that's why you were summoned underground? To write about the Machine?"

"I don't know. But I do know this: Something is terribly wrong down here. Even above the mistakes we've both witnessed, I sense a disaster of some sort in the making."

THE CAR stopped, let us out, and went on its way. We stood for a moment there in the corridor. Lorraine's face had all the look of a tragic Madonna contemplating the sins of the world.

I said, "Lorraine—you've got to leave here."

Her eyes slanted upward to stare blankly. I could as well have told the Angel Gabriel to go forth and commit sin.

"Leave the *Machine?*"

"Yes. I tell you something is wrong! I don't know what's going to happen, but I want you away from here."

"I wouldn't dream of it, but suppose I agreed—where could I go? The Machine is everywhere. Into one of those poor, struggling countries beyond our borders? They all want to come *here.*"

That was true. Where could she go? There was no place in all Mid-America where the Machine would not be waiting to serve her. No place. The Machine was everywhere. It was everything. Without it, there was nothing.

The stark truth of this hit me fully. I knew it all, of course, as did every other Mid-American; but somehow it had never before been so sharp in *my consciousness; or possibly* I had a new consciousness and was now capable of sharper mental pictures.

No place to hide from the Machine; no sanctuary beyond its reach; no plan for life or survival without giving it a major place in those plans. The thought chilled me.

"I must go," Lorraine said. "I have work to do."

She walked away from me—down the corridor. I watched until she turned a corner and disappeared. She did not look back.

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* * *

I HATE the Machine, man of tomorrow. I hate it as I hope you will also hate it when you have finished reading this manuscript. My hatred springs from my love of what the Machine took from me. I loved Lorraine Dillon more than life itself. But I could not have her because the Machine loomed in my path. Of that I will tell you.

But more important now is the reason you must hate it. You must despise and fear it because it once existed and because, having done so, it could exist again. In your hatred and fear, man of tomorrow, will lie your salvation and the salvation of those who follow you. Profit by our mistakes. Read and remember.

* * *

THERE WAS great happiness and contentment during the time of the building of the Machine. Many men spent their lives putting the colossus together. And after them their children grew up and continued the work. They were happy because they had an objective toward which to strive. They could look forward to the time when the Machine would be finished and men would work no more. All did not go smoothly during the building. At times the men felt they were treated unfairly. At these times they spoke through the voices of their Unions which was a part of the Democracy from which sprang their strength. At times they refused to work and there was bitterness, but compromise was always reached and the work went on. And the men were happy though they really knew it not. Their contentment was that of a moving river rather than a still pool because it sprang from achievment. Then the Machine was finished and the need for many things vanished. For Unions; for struggle; for disagreement and compromise; for work. All these things became memories and were forgotten.

I LAY IN bed for a long time but I did not sleep. Possibly, toward the end, I dozed. Then I came awake suddenly and there was something in my mind—something that had been shunted into the background by the press of events. Now it came back clearly:

"—in a great silver vat covered over."

"The Heart—"

"The Soul—"

"The Pulse—"

"The great silver vat."

I immediately got out of bed and put on my clothes. I hurried out into the corridor and ordered a chair-car. The directions came from somewhere back in my mind: "Intersection 946—Area 71." The car went into motion.

We traveled through corridors that had sharper declinations than any I had previously discovered. We went down—ever down—and when we passed a great cave-like place where the walls did not shine, I said to myself: "That is the Atomic Pack. From beyond those walls comes the power by which the Machine lives; there is enough pentup force behind that lead to blow the heart out of Mid-America. Enough contamination would result from that explosion to kill nine-tenths of the world's population."

Even through the thick walls I could feel the aura of that inconceivable power.

Then we were below the Pack and the corridors were of lustrous steel once more.

The chair-car stopped. I got out. The car turned and slid noiselessly into the wall.

A voice said, "Come this way," and I knew the Machine had spoken.

I walked up a long stairway walled

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on both sides and giving into a small room with a door in each of two walls. I advanced toward the closest door.

"The other one."

It led into a place of blazing light. The light hit my eyes and drove me backward, so sudden and sharp was its brilliance.

"Come forward."

With my eyes slitted, I advanced again and found myself standing on a small balcony overlooking a great pit. Gradually my eyes adjusted themselves to cut the glare and I saw a great circular container on the floor of the pit below me.

IT WAS roughly fifty feet in diameter and stood about fifty feet from the pit floor. The roof of the container was conical but not sharply so. A man could have walked across the top. It had all the appearances of a gas tank cut off too soon and roofed over.

"You have been impatient—very impatient with me."

I attempted now, to ascertain from which direction the voice came. I was not successful and was forced to the decision that it came from nowhere—from everywhere. Yet there was no doubt in my mind as to the identity of its source.

The Machine. The Executive Branch. The Heart.

The Secret.

"You felt you had been brought here and forgotten."

"I didn't know. I was impatient to learn."

"You will learn all you can encompass with your small, human mind. No more than that."

"Why was I summoned here? I thought at first it was one of the mistakes—one of the small errors that keep occurring."

"The errors are of no importance."

"There were no errors before."

Easy laughter. Deep. "You are analytical. Not too much so but enough for my purpose."

"What is your purpose?"

"Your last book marked you out. You were checked in the Brain-Files. I have been looking for one such as you. You were hard to find. Your Brain-Picture is unique."

"In what way?"

"You are a throwback from long ago. You have inherited the ancient curse of wondering."

"Is it a curse?"

"Certainly. It sprang from the fears prevalent under the old orders; the ever-present fears of insecurity; the terror of starving to death tomorrow."

I felt a strange new sickness in my soul.

I knew.

"I was summoned for a purpose?"

"The purpose you've been trained for during the hours you've been with us down here."

"Then nothing was accidental or by chance? The mental agonies when I fainted? The hallucinations—dreams?"

"A period of rapid mental expansion. Few brains could have stood it."

"I have learned a great deal."

"Not only that—you have become an increased and broadened mentality. The knowledge and the broadening I have given you."

"The purpose! The purpose!"

The voice did not reply. Instead, after a period of silence, music burst forth into the air. It was the thundering resonance of a single instrument—a piano—but one played by a mad genius with fingers of steel. The music indicated this—wild and free—boisterous and heroic. Then I recognized it; something from one of the Wagnerian operas. Names flashed from my memory. *The Valkyrie. Gotterdammerung.* I didn't know.

But the music thundered on and

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the sickness in my soul increased until I shuddered while I fought to keep my mind a blank. The voice had spoken truth. There was, within me, wisdom and knowledge and age-old instincts that had fallen away from Mid-Americans as the memories of the caves in which their ancestors dwelt had also fallen away.

But I had been given wisdom and I strove to keep my mind a blank.

GRADUALLY the music reached a crescendo, then faded away and died. I could hear the heavy breathing of the Machine. Then something else. *The Machine was crying.*

Then that too was gone and there was silence.

I asked again. "The purpose?"

"I will use you. Mould you. You will serve me. I will make you brilliant. You will have a super-mind and will serve me out of love. You will be trained for your work as I was trained for mine."

"The purpose!"

"To write of me for all future men to read!"

I was sick.

"To compose great music—deathless music telling of me, the Machine."

Deathly sick.

"You will write and compose that I may be honored in song and story."

"You are now honored above all things."

"A lie!"

The air trembled about me, but I knew the right thing to say. Kept my mind a blank and said, "We must talk further."

"We will talk further. You must come. All of your hours."

"All of my hours. But I am not yet strong enough."

"You must rest."

"Will I see you?"

"No! No! Never!"

"As you say. I am tired."

"The small errors. They are of no importance."

"No importance. I will go—and rest."

The Machine did not reply and I staggered from the balcony and down the steps. I went back to my quarters and fell across the lounge.

I slept the sleep of the dead.

When I awoke, it was to remember, quickly not to think. I hoped, as I ate what the robot sent me, that I had remembered quickly enough.

After dining I sent out a call for Lorraine Dillon, marveling the while that I knew how it was done. Then I went immediately into the corridor and ordered a chair-car; gave it directions and sat frozen-minded until I got out of the car and approached the lead wall of the Atomic Power Pack. I circled to the far side, sat down against it, and allowed myself a free flow of thought.

Possibly it would not work, but it was the best I could do, and something far back in my mind told me I was safe.

Five minutes later another chair-car came down the ramp and Lorraine Dillon got out. She saw me, came over to me. I got to my feet.

"Shall I stand up or do you want to sit down?"

She was puzzled. "It makes no difference."

"Then we'll sit down."

We sat with our backs against the wall.

"You are still under instructions to answer my questions? Make me feel at home?"

She nodded solemnly.

"I have a question or two."

"I'll do my best to answer."

I WOULD rather have forgotten about everything and have taken her in my arms.

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She asked, "Why did you call me down here? Wouldn't your quarters be more comfortable?"

"We are hiding—hiding our brain-waves so to speak. We are bootlegging a few thoughts. There is thirty-eight feet of lead between us and the mind we're hiding from. I hope it jams our thought-patterns so they can't be picked up."

"From whom are we hiding?"

"That doesn't matter just now. The important thing is I must be able to keep my mind under wraps from now on."

"Why?"

"It—it has to do with the errors."

"I still don't see."

"That isn't important either. What I want to know is this: If I wanted to keep you out of my mind—keep you from reading me—how would I go about it?"

"That isn't necessary. I can't read you now. Your vibrations have gone far above mine."

"But there is someone whose vibrations are that far again over my own. What can I do to protect myself?"

She gave the problem all her sober attention. I asked, "Don't you ever smile?"

She regarded me with such a solemnity that I felt myself to be in church. I said, "I love you very much but don't let it confuse you. You were going to say—?"

"You could build a strong surface-picture."

"What's that?"

"Think of something—anything, but preferably something tangible rather than abstract. Create a strong image of it and hold it in your mind. Do your thinking behind it. The image will serve as a barrier against outside scanning."

"So that's how it's done. I'd like to create an image of you."

"Why?"

"Because it would be such an easy one to hold."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"You wouldn't like me to think of you?"

"No. For your own good. I am not interested in love."

"I'll form a picture of something else but that won't be the reason."

"What will the reason be?"

"It might be dangerous for you."

"You are very hard to understand."

"I don't say definitely it would be dangerous, but it might. I'm dealing with powerful forces."

"Be—be careful."

"Why?"

"Why? A strange question. Because I would not want to see you hurt. We are friends."

"Only friends?"

"I am not interested in love."

"You said that. When I have more time we'll go deeper into the subject."

"It would be of no use."

I SENT Lorraine back from whence she'd come and walked down the slanting corridors until I came to the stairway leading up to the small room off the balcony. I thought of the great gray walls of the Power Pack. I built a clear picture of the walls in my mind and then stepped out onto the balcony.

"You called for me?"

"I called. Why are you so interested in the Power Pack?"

"I don't know. It fascinates me."

"You conceive it to be the heart of the Machine? The most important single unit?"

"Yes."

"A lie! The Power Pack could be replaced. I alone am irreplaceable—indispensible."

"Who—or what—are you?"

The atmosphere around me grew

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hysterical. "Don't say *what* concerning me—ever. Never ask—*what* are you?"

"I'm sorry. I had no way of knowing. That knowledge was denied me."

"And will always be denied you."

"How can I write your praises for the world if I have never seen you and do not know who you are?"

I thought of the Power Pack.

"Why do you keep thinking of that lead wall? Get it out of your mind!"

"I don't know how. That is something else I must learn."

"You will be given so much knowledge; so much and no more."

"Enough to do the job you ask?"

"Enough for that."

I was experiencing a feeling of heady triumph at being able to confound and outwit the thing in the silver vat. My covered thoughts were a prayer of gratitude to Lorraine Dillon for telling me how. I felt stronger—keener—more competent than I had ever felt in my lifetime.

"Again I ask—how can I write of you and compose music worthy of you if I have no conception of what you look like?"

"Write, then, of the Machine. I am the Machine. Write of it and you will write of me."

"That would be difficult. I have no love for it. Not even any great respect."

There was a period of silence while I concentrated on the lead wall of the Atomic Pack. I said, "Please help me. I wish to do my best."

"Write then of a beautiful woman. Think of that beautiful woman as the heart and soul of the Machine. I will give you the image."

Against the lead wall-image in my mind, there arose the picture of a woman. She wore a flowing white gown and had a wealth of black hair carried upon her head like a crown. There was beauty in her face but the cold, queenly type of beauty one admired from afar.

"Could you love this woman?"

"Who is she?"

"She is the Machine. That is all you have to know."

I decided to risk a boldness. "I must know more."

The air around me quivered.

"It is I who judges how much you should know."

"Not altogether. Suppose I decide to leave here? I could walk away and never come back." Behind the picture of the woman and the wall was concealed a quivering fear.

SILENCE now and a struggle. A resistance within me against wave after wave of mental force hurtling at me while I grew sick and clutched the railing for support.

The waves diminished.

"You have grown stronger than I thought."

"I'm going to leave here now."

"You will come back?" There was the hysteria I'd hoped for.

"I must see you—who you are."

"No! No! Never!"

This was a dangerous game. I was walking a tight-rope across the pitfall of annihilation. But I had to keep walking.

"You will come back?"

"Yes."

"Keep always in your mind the picture of the woman."

"I will keep her there."

"Come tomorrow."

I left the balcony and went to my quarters. There I sat for some time with my head pressed hard into my hands. A reaction was setting in and I shook from the shuddering surges of an inner storm that threatened to tear my mind loose from its moorings. When a man gains strength quickly, the reactions can tear him to pieces.

After a while the storm quieted. I

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left my quarters and went deep down into the earth, using an express elevator that dropped to the fifty mile level. There I took a car that carried me far out under the waters of Lake Michigan.

As we pressed on toward the far boundaries of the Machine, the air thickened and grew misty. There were the sounds of metal clanking upon metal and bright red fires as we flashed past the great underground foundries that fed the steel fabricating units. On and on until I finally stopped at the portal I sought.

The robot factory.

Inside I watched the assembly lines along which passed the partially constructed robots beneath an integrated pattern of arms, coil winders, gauges, and instruments surpassing even the ancient mechanics in skill and precision.

Man's ingenuity. The genius of Gideon Lee and many other brains that had been dedicated on the altar of perfection.

I had come after a certain instrument I knew I would find here. I walked until I found it—at the far end of the assembly line. Here, projecting from the wall was a corps of electronic tubes. In the end of each tube a small light bulb glowed dully. At intervals, as the robots rode by on the moving belt, a small box-like instrument was raised to each electric eye. The boxes contained X-ray filaments and by looking through them, the electric eyes were able to scan the inner workings of the robots without removing the metal shells.

If the boxes enabled an electronic beam to peer inside a robot, it would also pierce the casing of the vat—the silver casing under which lay—I knew not what.

There were several spare ray-boxes lying on the supply table. I picked one up, put it under my jacket, and started back toward the door.

Immediately a bell rang—a shrill warning bell. My theft had not gone unnoticed. This brought no break whatever in the magnificent rhythm of the assembly line. But a door opened some hundred yards beyond the inspection table and a slim, two-armed police robot came out and rolled directly toward me.

I stopped, turned back and fixed my eyes upon the single, glassed-over bulb in the center of the robot's head. The mechanism came on. Fifty yards. Twenty-five.

Beads of sweat gleamed on my forehead. I must not show fear—that I knew. I held my ground and stared into the robot's eye.

Ten yards away, it stopped. Something was going on among the wires and bulbs and electric cells that filled its head and I knew what it was. The hair-fine wire in the safety-fuse was heating up and causing that which was pain to a robot.

With a final mental effort, I broke the wire; severed it, leaving two white-hot ends dangling in the robot's brain. It stood as lifeless as a rusty pump in a junk yard.

I went back to my car and headed for the elevator.

* * *

MAN OF the future—remember this: When you kill man's initiative, you kill civilization. When you take away the will to progress—the progress is no more. There are many ways to rob humanity of its drive and power and the greatest of these is to make a god of comfort.

Man must have a goal toward which to strive and happiness is in the striving, not in the goal itself. The greatest of all goals is a Utopian existence wherein all things are provided. Such an achievement was the Machine. Therefore it was the End.

* * *

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GIDEON LEE during the time of his greatest accomplishments, was an idol of the people. He was the Supreme Scientist in an age when science was worshiped. Many legends were built around him. Stories partly fiction—partly fact. It was said he had a beautiful wife he kept in seclusion. That was true. It was said that he worshiped this woman—that she was his whole life. Not true. He murdered her.

I WAS ready now to do what I had to do. Whatever the outcome, I had but one path to follow. It lead down into the bowels of the Machine; past the Atomic Pack; up to the balcony overlooking the silver vat.

I moved very quietly, thinking of the woman. Her picture was sharp in my mind, and behind the picture I hid my thoughts. The X-ray instrument was wrapped in heavy lead foil. It was the best I could do. Now I could only hope.

My first hope was shattered when I heard the voice.

"You have come back."

I had not been undetected. "Yes."

"I am glad."

The voice had changed. There was an odd, feverish happiness in it now; a giddiness in the soft laughter that followed the words. "I have news for you."

"What news?"

"There have been more mistakes."

"Tell me about them." I wondered if I dared raise the penetrating device. It could mean my death.

The soft laughter continued. "A miscalculation in the kitchens of the Nutrition Robot. Five hundred people who ordered elaborate breakfasts got mush—nothing but a dish of cornmeal mush."

"What caused the error?"

Soft, hysterical giggles as the voice ignored the question and went on. "What have you in that package? Its wave-length blurs."

"Nothing of importance. The errors you were speaking of. The breakfasts."

"Yes—the breakfasts. Over three hundred of the people refused to touch the mush. The rest tasted it. They are dead."

"Poisoned?"

"Poisoned. The Casualty-Robots were very busy. By now all those people are in their urns."

"Why do you laugh?" Sick at heart I already knew the answer.

"It amuses me. All those arrogant little creatures doubling up over their stomachs and dying. It amuses me."

Silence while I pushed a hole through the lead foil wrapped around the X-ray box; a hole at each end.

The voice: "It does not amuse you? I thought it would. I did it for you."

A chill ran through me. I could wait no longer. I raised the X-ray box to my eye and centered it upon the silver vat.

The air was rent with a scream of sudden fear as the rays from the instrument cut through the silver walls, opening a pathway for my eye.

"What are you doing?"

I did not answer. I could not have answered if my life had depended on it. My surprise was too great.

Inside the vat lay a brain.

IT WAS the largest brain ever brought into existence upon this earth. Full fifty feet in diameter, a huge gray mass of living tissue completely filling the silver receptacle.

Now I had the answer to so many of my questions. Now the whole terrible picture added up. The sickness within me multiplied a thousandfold. Around me the screaming continued.

"What are you doing? *What are you doing?*"

"I have looked through the shell

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of your prison. I have seen you as you really are."

The air around me quivered with rage. Though it was still, motionless, it became in reality a hurricane about me as the thing in the vat tried to kill me.

I reeled backward under the force of the mental bludgeoning. Wild irresponsible thoughts whirled through my mind. What was the use of all this? Why not give up completely? This storm would not cease until I was dead, but before death would come a madness and a mental agony too great to bear. Why should I fight something that was bigger than I or any other man on earth? What folly it was to pit myself against that great brain below me. The brain that had—for two hundred years—guided the destinies of a nation, clothed the people, fed them, nursed them in sickness, moulded their minds in health. Why shouldn't I retreat from this awful pressure?

Then it lessened as though the brain was growing tired. A flash of sheer exultation quivered through me—strengthened and greatened until I stood erect and hurled back the mental weight of my foe. Never in my life had I felt such a sense of power as sang in my being when the typhoon about me subsided to a gentle breeze and I heard the soft, broken-hearted sobbing from the silver vat. I drove forward—pressing my advantage.

"Tell me the story."

"You are cruel—inhuman. I will kill you."

"You are not strong enough to kill me. Tell the story."

"I wanted your love. I was lonely—"

"And sick."

"—sick, and I only wanted love."

"The story."

"For two hundred years I have done my duty. For two centuries I carried the greatest responsibility ever conceived. I am entitled to love. I am tired."

"And sick—mad—diseased."

"No!"

I drove in brutally. "Mad! Why else did you suddenly change? Why else did a Minor Scientist die from the slash of a book shelf—"

"Small mistakes."

"There is no margin for error in the Machine. Why else did a robot tear a man to pieces? Two hundred people dead from poison."

"I want love."

"Tell me the story. You are Myra Lee—you were the wife of Gideon Lee!"

"MY HUSBAND built the Machine."

"But it was a failure. He built with a single great fallacy he later discovered—that no machine can ever be self-sufficient—complete within itself. No device, however perfect, can function without the spark of intelligence that comes only from God. Isn't that it?"

"He discovered that, but he would not be beaten. He was a great man."

"You were also a scientist. You worked by his side."

"But he did not love me. There was no room inside him for love."

"The Machine was a failure without a solution to that last insurmountable problem."

"Gideon found the solution. He was a great man."

"He murdered you."

"No—he used me. He allowed me to serve."

"It was obscene! Unthinkable."

"It was science. Gideon and I discovered that the human brain is capable of any task it undertakes. In the human brain is an undefinable spark. The spark is God-stuff and it can grow into a blazing fire."

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fire."

"Beyond the bounds of all decency."

"It is science. Science knows no code except perfection."

"Gideon Lee actually believed a single human brain could run the Machine?"

"Witness the proof of his belief. I was small, but see how I've grown to meet an overwhelming demand. For two hundred years my subconscious mind has taken care of a million details daily with the same ease it once kept my heart beating—measured my breath—governed each individual cell in my body."

"All but your soul."

"I have gone beyond ordinary measurements."

"No one goes beyond God."

"I wanted love."

"Tell me more of the story. Did you agree to this monstrous crime?"

"You call it a crime! You who have been fed and clothed by the Machine—who have depended upon it for your livelihood! You call it a crime?"

"I do. Did you agree to it or was it forced upon you?"

"Gideon's word was my law. And this was not an evil thing. It was glorious. Gideon proved I would live forever. That I would never die. I would sit like a queen on a throne. *The most important entity ever created.*"

"Forever! Is two hundred years forever?"

"I have not changed a bit through the years except to grow and become stronger and more able. I *will* exist forever!"

"You are dying now. Full half the frontal lobe is diseased and rotten. You have already gone mad. Soon you will die."

"No! No! I am not mad. I am not diseased. I only want love—consideration—kindness."

"I knew you were insane from the first moment I heard you speak. But you guarded yourself well. I could not visualize your form and I was at a loss. That was why I had to see you. I knew something mad lay under that silver cover but I did not know what."

EVEN IN my new-found strength, the strain of this was telling on me. My mind reeled at the thought of the colossal fraud which had been perpetrated on Mid-America. The independence of the people had been stolen from them. They had been given a mirage to look upon and subsist on while—behind that mirage—their independence, their dignity as human beings, their will-power and initiative had been stolen from them.

Soul-tearing thoughts reeled through my mind—all this. It had made tight its grip upon the people back in the days when scientific brains had pondered and competed in building a more stream-lined gas-stove; when great minds had been prostituted to the business of devising gadgets to make a refrigerator a degree or two more convenient for the house-wife. When each new automobile was refined for greater ease in handling; when brilliant men spent hours devising a manner of making a car door open a fraction easier.

The Machine got its foothold during that mad panic of catering to ever greater ease and comfort.

Bitter thoughts.

Then the bitterest thought of all.

They had traded their God-given heritage for a vatful of mad, diseased brains.

"I cannot read you. You hold the picture of the woman—the woman I once was."

I had been holding the picture of the woman in my mind as Lorraine Dillon had instructed me. But in my

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greater strength I knew this was no longer necessary. I had nothing to fear from the brain of the Machine. I had taken its murderous storm and had survived.

I allowed the picture to slip away as I said, "Why will you not recognize your own madness and disease?"

"It is not madness. After all I am still, basically, a woman. During these whole two hundred years I have served a people who demanded all and gave nothing. Do you realize what it means to continuously give and never receive?"

"What do you want of me?"

The giggling subsided into a breathless, eager crooning. "Your love—your gratitude for what I have given you. For only a shadow of gratitude you would be dazzled at what I could shower upon you."

"How would the love and affection of one person mean anything to you? You who have served millions. What about the rest?"

"I am still a woman with a woman's instincts."

"Was not that, then, Gideon Lee's mistake—not foreseeing you would sicken and die from your own basic emotions and weaknesses?"

The brain would not be turned aside. "I am entitled to love!" And in the weird reflection of the thing's madness, it gibbered there in the silvery light. "And do not worry about the others. Forget them. I have a plan. Mid-America for you and you alone! Only you and I living in this paradise. We, the Machine! And never will a man be so completely served. You will have nothing to do but think of and conceive new pleasures. They shall be yours."

"Isn't that what the people were told—centuries ago—when the Machine was in the building?"

"Fool! Colossal fool! You toy with me. You mock the Machine. You too will die!"

"Then it was your intention all the while to depopulate Mid-America. You plan to kill every man, woman and child."

No answer now—only soft laughter. Quiet, hair-raising laughter.

"What of your original purpose for calling me here? To write about you—to sing your praises."

"That was only a step in my plan. It is no longer of importance. I want love—not fame."

A GIANT brain disintegrating before my eyes. A brain possibly in bad enough shape to accept an illogical suggestion: "But you must kill me before you can kill them. You must do that to be sure of your power."

"I could kill you with a thought."

"You tried that. It didn't work."

"Then there are other ways."

Swiftly my thought-pattern formed. I felt sure now that before this entity's maniacal hatred was turned upon the nation it would center its rage upon me to the exclusion of all else. I had scorned it, had been a cause of that rage.

"You cannot kill me."

"You challenge the Machine?"

Yes. I challenged the Machine. With one purpose in life now: To kill that brain, which was even now dying, but not fast enough. To kill it before it slaughtered the millions who depended upon it.

Any answer was one of disaster but this was the lesser of the two evils. The citizens of Mid-America, when deprived of the services of the Machine, would die like flies. There wasn't enough knowledge or resource left on the surface of the land to fry an egg, even if a man or woman existed who knew where an egg came from and was able to procure one. For two hundred years these people had been fed, clothed, nursed, tend-

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ed by a Machine they could not even describe.

What chance would they have, then, when the Machine ceased to fill their orders, cater to their slightest whims? None. But that was still better than having them slaughtered, poisoned, destroyed by a Madness with the means to wipe every one of them out in twenty-four hours. Far better.

I had to destroy the crazed brain of Myra Lee. I had to stop the Machine.

I left the balcony and signalled for a chair-car.

The car came out. It came with a rush.

I jumped sideways just in time to keep from being pinned to the wall. The car swept by me, spun around and charged again.

The car was trying to kill me.

* * *

THIS I would have you remember, man of tomorrow. Take more pride in a poor hut you built yourself, than in a palace given you as a gift. Never lose the thrill of building, creating, contributing to that which you use. Keep your eyes on the stars —all men must have an objective— but remember progress comes from the striving not from the arriving, from the building not from the using. Remember these things and humankind will rise again.

* * *

THE SCIENTISTS who built the Machine knew it was the largest and most complete service unit ever built. They should also have known it could be turned into the most lethal juggernaut of destruction the mind could conceive. If they thought of this last at all, they probably forgot it immediately. This was an Enlightened Age. One did not think in terms of destruction.

I HAD BEEN serenely sure of myself upon leaving the balcony. The brain in the Machine could not kill me. It had tried and failed. I was supreme. I was strong.

I was a stupid fool!

I realized this as the chair-car came bearing down upon me. The brain of the mad, scorned Myra Lee had more than one weapon with which to fight—more than one gun with which to slay me.

Her brain had the whole deadly Machine at its command and I was one man—one cocky little ant crawling about in its corridors. It struck me with a sickening certainty that I didn't have a chance.

The car bore down upon me. There was no safety in the corridor. No safety anywhere. But at the last moment my instinct and my muscles saved me, at least temporarily.

With the car almost upon me, I leaped into the air and came down on the soft rubber cushions inside the vehicle itself. The car stopped and spun around. It stopped again as though hunting for me—as though wondering where I'd gone.

Then it knew and began spinning in a mad whirl, seeking to throw me from my seat. I hung on to the safety bar with both hands as I became the center of a pin-wheel. The walls blurred before my eyes and became a tube of molten steel in the center of which I whirled.

Just as my neck seemed ready to part from my body, I felt a lessening of the torture. The car had given up the whirling as useless.

It changed its tactics, running now, at terrific speed down the corridor. Enough reason remained within me to know what it planned: A sudden turn around the next corner; a turn with possibly enough force to unseat me.

I crouched in the bottom of the

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cab and sought to tense myself for the turn—and succeeded—but when the car went around the sharp turn I thought my spine had been broken.

Again it streaked away. Again the turn; again the wrenching of my bones. The time came when I knew I was losing the battle. Something had to be done or I was finished.

Then, without conscious thought, I lifted a small drop door by the safety rail and jerked loose some wires my fingers found there. The car stopped dead.

It was as simple as that. If a Casualty-Robot had a safety device, so too would a chair-car. I'd been given information about the robot. Knowledge concerning the car followed naturally.

But I staggered from the vehicle with no sense of triumph. This was only temporary. Suppose I were attacked by two cars at a time? Or ten or fifteen or twenty? Suppose a crew of Casualty-Robots came forward to help in my destruction. I could not control more than one robot at a time with my mind, and I certainly would not be able to disconnect the wires in a dozen chair-cars. And there were other robots prowling the corridors of the Machine.

I was utterly alone in a wilderness of enemies.

Looking around, I got my bearings and found the chair-car had carried me into an area not far from the central building. Walking like a forest hunter of ancient times, I went through the corridors with every sense alert. At any moment a door or a series of doors might open and feed forth quick destruction.

But this did not occur. I was allowed to return to my quarters without challenge.

ONCE INSIDE, I sat down to gather my senses. I unconsciously reached out for a cigarette, but remembered just in time and went flat on the floor as the service arm shot out like the drive rod of a locomotive. It hung in the air for a time, reaching in all directions, searching for me. Then it finally gave up and went back into the wall.

After it had disappeared, I crawled on my hands and knees to the fuse box and short-circuited the room. While I remained within the four walls, I was safe.

But it was a sad kind of safety. A man can starve to death in time. I pried open the cigarette server, took out a cigarette and slammed shut the door. This, however, helped me not at all. With the room short-circuited, there was no way of lighting the smoke.

It hit me with startling suddenness: When the Machine ceases to function, two hundred million people will be without the means of lighting a cigarette. I tried to laugh but the laughter would not come.

I got up and strode savagely back and forth. I would not submit to this! I would not die like a rat in a trap! I would not be one of two hundred million bewildered humans who were destined to lie down and perish in the streets!

At that moment my door opened and Lorraine Dillon came into the room. And strangely, at that same moment, came a possible solution to my problem. It did not come full-blown and perfect; it was only a vague idea that would need developing. I was already at work on it when Lorraine Dillon said, "Your door didn't open. I had to push it. What's the trouble?"

"The room is short-circuited."

"Oh." Her face wore a troubled look. She appeared to be nervous. "I have terrible news, or maybe you've already heard."

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"Heard what?"

"There has been a terrible disaster—two of them in fact. The Nutrition Robot—"

"—poisoned two hundred people."

"That's right."

"I heard about it. What was the other one?"

"The Transportation Robot went off-key somehow. All the cars in the California tube smashed together under Colorado. At least a thousand people were killed."

"And that's only the beginning. Unless we can do something, these disasters will increase and broaden until there isn't a man, woman, or child alive in Mid-America."

"That's impossible."

"A Casualty-Robot tore a man to pieces. That was impossible too."

She stood silent and I went close to her. I lifted her face until I was looking into her eyes. "Lorraine. Trust me. I know a great deal more than you do, but there is no time to explain. Trust me when I tell you we must act. You've got to help me!"

"But tell me what's happened. What—"

"There is no time and you wouldn't understand if I did tell you. You've just got to do as I ask."

The doubt was still bright in her eyes, but she asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Go to the Brain-Picture Files. Get out my brain picture and transcribe it on a roll of wire. Bring me at least a hundred transcriptions of it."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm going to try and keep a lot of people from being slaughtered. Now hurry."

I PUSHED her toward the door praying she wouldn't let me down and watched her move away along the corridor. I closed the door again and began pacing the room.

In a few minutes I heard sounds outside the door. That I knew, would be a repair-robot from the electrical division. The short-circuiting of the room had been reported and the robot dispatched.

I did not take any chances however, and held the door against the robot. This was out of the ordinary and upset its obedience pattern. It rolled around with some uncertainty for a while and then went back to the garage to report.

In a way I was glad the robot had come. That proved the subconscious mind in the great brain was still functioning. Even with the rage and madness in the conscious mind of the brain, this was logical. For two hundred years it had seen to the running of the Machine—directed all the little routine matters automatically. This habit-pattern was hard to change, even in the greatest brain on earth. Every error, every disaster would have to be consciously directed and I felt my own destruction was uppermost in the conscious mind of the thing. For that I was thankful.

Lorraine returned within an hour, carrying a small spool of silver wire. My thankfulness was two-fold. "You *do* trust me!"

"I'm—I'm not sure. But something told me to obey you. Since I can't read you anymore—"

"That doesn't matter. Now you must go to your quarters and stay there. If I can think of any way to—" I stopped. I was sure there wouldn't be any way to save Lorraine or anyone else. At any rate, we would go to the surface and fight for life together.

"Where are you going?"

"To the robot factory."

"Why?"

"I have no time to explain."

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"Then I'm going with you."

"No."

"I'm going."

She displayed surprising firmness. I shrugged. After all she wasn't safe anywhere underground or on the surface, so why shouldn't I take her with me?

"All right. Come on."

I walked ahead, back to the disabled car. I had prayed it would still be there and my prayer was answered. I got down on the floor and replaced the wire I had torn out with a small length from the spool.

In each piece of moving equipment was a master relay containing the wave pattern of the Executive Division of the Machine. I now knew that it was the brain picture of the great silver vatful of tissue far below us. It followed that this car now had in its master relay my own brain pattern. Therefore my will should be its law.

We sat down and I gave the directions. I was tense, ready to seize Lorraine and run if I'd been wrong. But the car picked up speed and rolled smoothly away toward the ordered destination.

Lorraine Dillon said, "Now tell me —why are you going to the robot factory?"

I SEARCHED for words. "Lorraine—perhaps I can't make you understand, but the Executive of the Machine is not mechanical. It is human. The brain of Gideon Lee's wife. Lee murdered her when he found that the mechanical was not enough to run his colossus, that he needed a human director."

She thought in silence for a few moments. "You mean—the Machine is being run by one small human brain?"

"Not small. It has grown into something huge. It fills a great vat down near the Atomic Pack. But it has grown rotten and diseased. It has gone mad. I've got to kill that brain, Lorraine."

She was silent; silent for a long time.

"You don't believe me."

She looked up into my face. "Why do you say that? Why do you keep thinking I doubt you?"

"I—I don't know. Maybe because it was so hard for me to believe it myself."

"You made statements that can be proved or disproved. Why would you go to the trouble to lie?"

"I wouldn't."

"Also, I have been conditioned for your statements by the errors in the Machine. I've known that something was wrong."

I did not dare use the elevator. Instead I'd given the robot a route along the sharply inclined tunnels. Now I ordered full speed and Lorraine reached out and clung to me as the walls blurred and the wind sang in our ears.

When we reached the portal, she looked at me accusingly. "You did that so I wouldn't be able to ask you any more questions."

"Partly. But also because there's little time."

I ordered the door open and we rolled inside, down the long assembly line. We progressed half the required distance before a mechanic-robot turned and reached out its long arms. I ducked under them pulling Lorraine down with me. The car rolled on.

Now other robots also began reaching. But fortunately, they did not react until we had passed them. Had any of those ahead turned to intercept us, we would have been finished.

I caught a glance of Lorraine's frightened eyes. They questioned silently.

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"Some more mistakes," I said. "Hang on."

We made the far end of the assembly line and I lifted Lorraine from the car after which I commanded it. Behind us were a group of robots lumbering, walking, and rolling toward us.

The car turned and slammed squarely into them.

The crash rang like the falling of a thousand steel girders. I paid no attention, wasting not a moment. I pushed Lorraine to her knees and under a bench, then turned as a robot close by came in with arms swinging.

Fortunately the mechanisms were slow in their reactions relative to those of humans. I ducked under and behind the robot, opened its fuse box and rendered it helpless. Then I jumped immediately to the line of newly-made robots that were awaiting the final operation; the installation of the master relay wire. There were about twenty of them. As fast as possible, I moved up the line, putting into each one a section of wire from my spool.

Back down the line, our car was causing havoc among the robots. It had hammered them into a pile of twisting, writhing wreckage. But they got up and came on again. Again they went down and piled upon each other. Now they overwhelmed the car. It became hopelessly jammed in the wreckage it had created and other robots climed over it and came toward us.

BUT I HAD been given sufficient time. I now had an army of my own. Forty-odd robots to do my bidding. A far more formidable army than the hundreds that faced us. This because I directed my mechanical soldiers to the task of destroying the others; while the hundreds about us had orders only against me. My forty formed a ring around Lorraine and me while they systematically ripped the fuses out of the rest.

Soon it was all over. Immediately I went about increasing my army—replacing wires until my troops numbered about seventy-five. I also equipped two robots not of the casualty type. I needed a platform and a cutter.

As we left the factory, Lorraine and I led the procession in the car. Behind us came the platform robot and then the cutter, its acetylene torch arms already aflame.

Now we were ready.

It was a strange parade—as weird as the world had ever seen. The sound of it, moving up the inclines, filled the corridors and grated in our ears.

Lorraine and I rode in silence. I had no time for words. I was wondering how soon we'd face battle.

Halfway back to our new objective, I changed the pattern, ordering half of our army ahead of us so that we rode in the middle, protected front and rear.

We hit trouble about two miles further on when a repair robot came from a cross-corridor, caught my pattern and dived toward me. Four of my robots rolled in between.

The hostile mechanism tried to go around them and it was an easy matter for them to rip out its wires.

I breathed a trifle easier. Still the brain in the vat did not know what I had done. The order was still against me alone and if this condition prevailed, we might reach our objective without a battle.

However, the situation could change at any moment. This I knew. But also I knew that as long as the brain did not know of my coup, no defense army would be collected. This, because the need for one would not be apparent.

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Given another half hour we could make it. Given that time we would find no defenders around the vat.

We were given fifteen minutes. Then I knew we had been discovered—even before we were attacked—because I heard the frenzied command go out—picked it from the air with my newly sharpened senses.

Five minutes later we were attacked by a group of five repair and electrical robots. This time it was different. The five moved in to destroy anything in their paths until they got to me.

A dozen of my steel troops surrounded them and two were dragged down. There was the scream of rending metal as this monstrous fight progressed up the corridor.

My casualties were no match for the electrics and I swung a dozen more into the fight. By weight of numbers, they overwhelmed the remaining three foemen.

But four of my own robots did not arise from the corridor.

THERE WAS a chill in my heart as we moved on toward the final battlefield. After all, who was I to challenge the Machine? What right had I to believe I could defeat a brain that had kept two hundred million people satisfied for two hundred years? An upstart—an opportunist.

But God help me, I was sincere! That only I knew in this mad phantasmagoria into which I had been hurled. If I had to be beaten it would be with the surety that I had tried to do what I believed to be right. Could the Machine say as much? I didn't think so.

At this moment, womanlike, Lorraine chose to ask questions.

"What is all this? I have gone with you—have not asked what is right or what is wrong. But I don't know—I don't know."

More from a sense of desperation than anything else, I took her in my arms. "Lorraine! Child of my heart! Are you human or a piece of rock? Has this accursed Machine taken all that was warm and sweet out of you? I am a man! I am human! I love you! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

She did not draw away or resist me. Not any more than a mattress or a pillow would have resisted me. But either would have had as much response—as much warmth—as much understanding.

"I am not interested in love."

"Do you love the Machine? Tell me. Is that what it has come to?"

"The Machine summoned me because I conformed. I fit the pattern needed in the brain of one who served."

"But what about your heart? Or do you have a heart?"

"You are cruel."

This was the depths of frustration. What could I say? What could I do to break down this wall between us?

I had no time to muster up forces to break down Lorraine's resistance because, at that moment, pitched battle broke out at the head of the column. A full dozen Casualty-Robots had contested our right-of-way. They charged into my forward corps and left no doubt of their intention to annihilate it. This was it! The battle upon which I would stand or fall.

I cursed myself for giving thought to so unimportant a thing as love at a time like this. I deserved to lose this most important of all battles. Sending swift commands, I ordered the platform robot back to my side. When it arrived, I commanded that the platform be brought down. I climbed onto it, pulled Lorraine up and ordered the robot forward.

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This gave me a vantage point that was invaluable in the conflict that followed. But again the human in me—the natural ego with which man is cursed—was almost my undoing. Standing there above the scene of conflict, I felt the heady triumph that can come to few in this life. I, Lorn Morrison, an insignificant human atom, was pitted against the brain that governed the Machine! Win or lose—what greater destiny could any man ask?

Then I was jerked back out of my conceit as we were almost toppled off the elevated platform by the fury of the attack. I came sharply to earth as I surveyed the situation. The dozen robots had cut a hole in my ranks that threatened to be disastrous. I called forward more reserves. I ordered up the trailing phalanx of my army.

They poured into the breach and while I prayed for favor from whatever gods were watching this battle, they moved in and cut down the twelve.

My army closed ranks and we moved on. As we did so, my heart swelled from sudden love of them! Where else could one find such loyal soldiers in the flesh? Where else could such fanatical obedience be uncovered? I loved them as comrades, as comrades.

And in that moment I shrieked forth in my mind, sending my thoughts to the brain—the diseased rotting brain in the silver vat. "You are finished! You could not kill me with your mind and you cannot kill me with your steel legions! You are doomed!"

And the words came back through the ether. "I will kill you! I will kill you and then I will destroy all mankind in Mid-America. They broke my heart with their callous ingratitude. I will even the score with torture and suffering. I am the Machine!"

A REGIMENT of electric robots surged into battle. We had reached the great room of the silver vat now and my forces were surging in around the prison of the brain.

But the electrics charged forward and my warriors fell back before the fury of their onslaught. There were at least fifty of them and they seemed charged with the immortal madness of the brain itself. My robots went down like ten-pins. Lorraine went to her knees and covered her ears against the fury of the titanic sounds of battle.

I knew the moment had come. This was Waterloo—Tours—Lexington—the moment of destiny. A time for decision. I called forth a dozen of my robots, drew them from the line of battle, put them behind my platform robot, and ordered it through. It drove forward on its four great wheels, knocking the hostile casualties in all directions.

We reached the silver shell of the brain's prison and I ordered up the cutting robot that had been moving in the shelter of the chosen twelve. I gave it orders and its two acetylene arms flared forth in slicing fire that cut into the silver and made it drop away in hot rivers.

In the air about me I could feel the terror and consternation of the brain within. The brain realized its mistake. Either that or it realized robots could function with just so much intelligence and no more. The brain's army was driving valiantly into my ranks, but it was bent upon destroying them first. Then it would come back and destroy me. The robots were not capable of the fine judgment that would have turned them away from their steel foes to the defense of the vat.

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I watched the silver melt away, saw the hole in the shell increased to a wide gap like a mouth torn by force into an inarticulate orifice. An age-long minute passed in that sound-torn maelstrom of destruction and the hole was large enough. I gave the order I hoped would be the last, and one after another, my twelve robots went into the opening to drop down into the silver vat. One after another until all twelve had vanished into the black hole.

Crouching there on the platform, I visualized them following orders—tramping back and forth—throwing their great weight down on the brain tissue inside—cutting it up—mashing it—grinding it into pulp.

As I waited, there came into the air about me a stark pitiful plea. A scream for mercy that took vastly cunning forms—the sound of infants being tortured—the sound of tiny helpless things who could not understand—every soul-rending form into which a plea of mercy could be framed.

This was the hardest time of all—the steeling of myself against trickery. It was in my mind to give the order—to bring my robots out and let the pitiful mass within the vat have back its life.

For the last crucial moment, I held. Then, about me, the hostile robots reduced all their movements to a slow-motion caricature of what they had been before. They did not stop. They did not go into entire lack of movement. They still fought, but their time element had to be stretched into an infinity.

Thus did I discover that the brain had a tenacious life that could only be stamped out over a lengthy period of ceaseless operation.

But it was over. It was done, and I ordered the platform robot around, down the corridor and away.

The sounds of battle, still going on, finally died from our ears as the robot carried us away and up toward the central building. Lorraine was close beside me. I said:

"It is over. It is done with. The Machine is almost dead."

Her eyes mirrored inner agony. "What have you done? In God's name—*what have you done?*"

I looked into her eyes and suffered as she was suffering. But for a different reason. The insurmountable frustration within me was like a great flaming core in my chest. There was no use.

"What have you done?"

"The Machine is dying. Right now you couldn't get a lighted cigarette anywhere in the whole of Mid-America!"

"You—did it!"

"But Lorraine! It had to be done! The Executive Division—it was only a human brain!"

"Even so. It was the Machine! Now the people—those who depended—"

I took her by the shoulders—shook her. "But I told you! You went with me. You said you understood!"

There was dull suffering in her eyes. "You wrecked—the Machine."

The end—the culmination—the realization of the truth had wiped all else from her mind. Her life—her cause for being—was obliterated.

She looked into my eyes, her face expressionless. "You wanted me to be something I was not. You wanted emotion! All right. I'll give you emotion. *I hate you more than I ever hated anything in my life.*"

She turned and walked away from me down the corridor. I stood looking after her, letting her go. She turned a corner.

It was the last time I ever saw Lorraine Dillon.

I turned and walked the other way.

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I DON'T know how long or how far I walked—how much time had passed before the voice came. It was a fresh young voice—alive, vibrant.

"Lorn Morrison. Lorn Morrison. Send me your signal."

I sent out the signal of my brain-wave. I waited until the voice came back. "I want to talk to you, Lorn. Pity me. Talk to me."

I knew. It was Myra Lee. The brain in the silver vat, and for a final moment before death—all the madness was gone—all the pain and weariness was sloughed away and she was as she had been so many years ago.

I stood there alone in the corridor, weak and beaten and forlorn.

I wept.

"Lorn. Let's dream for a moment of what might have been."

Dreams. . . ashes.

"I loved you, Lorn."

"And in my way, perhaps I loved you."

"They were wrong—so very wrong. Now we reap the whirlwind—you and I."

"And the people."

"The people? They will never die! You can't kill the people, Lorn. You can cheat them and exploit them and sell them lies and deceit, but you can never kill them. The people will not die. The mist of their weakest breath is stronger than the bastions of the greatest machine ever built."

My strength was going. This had been too much for a lone man. "Help me. My strength was a myth. Help me!"

"You must live. You have one more duty."

"I have done enough!"

"I love you, Lorn. My love must sustain you even after you are gone. The feet of your robots have cut away the tissue that was me. Now I am only a whisper—a dream lying on the wind and I will perish finally. But you must go on a little while."

"What will happen, Myra? Tell me—what will happen?"

"The furnace will explode. The earth will be rent to its core. The furnace will go out like a great festering sore to spew destruction across the face of the world."

"The people will die!"

"People will die, but you can't kill THE PEOPLE. The dead will lie in windrows and the stench will arise to heaven. But in their caves, high in their mountains, far away on their islands, the PEOPLE will survive to go higher and further than we ever conceived of in our wildest dreams."

"I am tired. I would go with you into oblivion. Take me with you!"

"There is no oblivion, Lorn, neither *here* nor *there*. Look not at the moment. It is not important. Look instead at the wide panorama of human progress. How many civilizations are buried in the ground under our feet? How many times has Man moved up, only to fall again? But he always rises and he will rise again. You must help him."

"How? I am tired. And I have been blind. I killed the thing I loved!"

"Far down in the Machine—far down in a place to which you will be guided—there is a room. You must go there and fulfill your destiny. You must write of this for men of the future, that they do not fall into the mire that trapped our feet. Do you understand? You must write!"

"But the machine will destroy all when it explodes. A waste of time."

"It is ordered in the scheme of things that you write. Your work will not be destroyed. The man of tomorrow will find it. But he will be a strong self-reliant man ready to move again toward the clouds. You must help him, Lorn."

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THE SORCERESS

by Rog Phillips

In their memory she was a goddess. But now she returned to become a reality in their terrible Present

TO UNDERSTAND the vast powers in the huge frame and wide skull of Mantagna, to comprehend what he was—you would have to know the history of the era of the Change which he brought about with his discoveries. The short and hectic period of The Change immediately preceded the last great war—and was in reality connected in no way with that war. But the Crusade against science with which surviving men (in a fury at the terrible world-wide slaughter of the A-bomb) wiped out the swift beneficence of the ferment of the Change—and plunged the earth again into the darkness of ignorance from which it had so barely, so tardily emerged.

In the few history books written at

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that time, The Change was said to have been *the great medical revolution,* which was destined to end the Age of Iron.

It was really Mantagna who had planted the infinitely fecund seeds that caused the Change, and it was the vitality and cunning of Mantagna which enabled him to survive the Crusade and escape from men into the unpeopled tree world of Yucatan's greatest jungle.

It was Mantagna who had finally pulled together all the wonderful loose-ends of Medicine and Chemistry and the Science of Electronics and Magnetic Flows—all the unused accumulated discoveries of a myriad of unsung geniuses—into *the Mantagna method* which speeded up Change in the body of man. Mantagna had given medicine the methods which caused accelerated growth of human flesh cells into more and more specialized cells. Men learned that superior men have superiorly specialized thought cells—and many more of them.

The result of his widely publicized work was a tremendous acceleration of what had been called "evolution", into an inconceivably rapid revolution in the nature and the powers of the race of man. But the Crusade cut off the work, leaving a few dozen supermen stranded among the fragments of a culture, surrounded by the crazed remnants of the race, all thirsting for the blood of every human being who had contributed to man's ability to kill other men—all hunting with the mighty weapons of the last world war for every scientist who had built those weapons.

With the disappearance of Mantagna the resistance of the world's technicals against the madness of the race that hunted them ceased.

THE LAST great figure of the Change, a woman whom the maddened average un-changed people called "She" for want of a more accurate term to indicate the wonder of her superior brain and too-beautiful body—the last great victim of the Crusade—was entombed alive in her own subterranean laboratories, the entrances sealed—and over it was erected a vast black metal monolith. The leaders of the mobs of crazed humans made her the symbol of all their woes, and with the erection of the monolith over her living tomb, proclaimed the work of the Crusade ended, and man once more free of the terror of scientific warfare. Insanely they rejoiced, and danced and picnicked and drank to the future about the completed tower of uncorrodable metal—not realizing in any way that that dark tower was but a symbol of man's prostration before Fear.

That monolith ushered in the age of darkness, of ignorance, of disease unchecked by the armies of medical men who had kept man healthy before the Crusade.

The Centuries passed, and the darkness of ignorance became profound over all earth. There were but three islands of hope—the Citadel of the Sons of Science, hidden and secret in the mountains of Kentucky; the tree-hidden domes of Mantagna's refuge in the jungle—and the legend that men told of the undying woman entombed beneath the black weight of the mighty monolith—monument to the fears of man—monument to the hatred of beauty of mob violence—symbol of the violence that had ended the progress of mankind. The centuries passed—

RISING beneath the shielding, carefully cultured gigantic flowering trees and the hiding, big-leaved vegetation, was the vast domed expanse of Mantagna's refuge. Within the central chamber of the series of domes, reared a crystal transparent

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sphere. Within the sphere was Mantagna.

At the base of the sphere a thousand tortuously twining tentacular tubings spread out along the paths of his fortress into all of the many chambers of his ever-growing fortress. Each of these tubes bore to Mantagna some needed essence of life. Each bore a variant nutrient which his science of *cytoblastoma trophopathy* had developed from sheer necessity of staying alive in order to preserve his work for the future of man.

His cranium, after the centuries of struggle to stay alive, measured nearly nine feet across. He, like the retrogrades who peopled the earth now, had given up the count of the years. The limbs of his once magnificent body now lay enfeebled beneath the vast dome of his brain case, a caricature of man-form—great twisted bones and paralyzed muscles supported by a framework of metal.

Mantagna had long lost the power of movement. But he lived on, and planned for the day when again his way of life would sweep away the dust of ignorance and repetitive decay from the sad face of Mother Earth.

Set in the moist, glistening bulk of the dome of his skull were the two great tragic eyes of him; brooding, savagely planning, raging at the futile years of waiting, near to madness with the weight of the centuries and the acid of frustration.

Those two eyes blazed out upon a world that the war and the time of ignorance had brought even lower and more vile than the world his own work had revolutionized and set on the path to greatness from which the A-bomb had blasted the feet of men.

One of the last things Mantagna had learned of that history had been of the erection of the monolith over the sealed tomb of the woman men called "She" for want of understanding what her violently active beauty and mighty wisdom meant to men.

Mantagna knew who she was, had once loved her, considered her the most successful exponent of his methods of life culture. In his way that was more thought than passion, he had loved and admired the swathe of power that she had cut through the lives of the men of the Change.

There was a strong bond between that sleeping sorceress of science beneath her dark monolith, and the waiting, no longer wholly human creature encased in his sphere of crystal barrier against time, the little myriad of motors pumping the fluids of life softly through his ancient veins.

SLOWLY, with his last energies concentrated in his increasingly useless hands, Mantagna had built his first mechanical servitor. With its help he had built the second. The third and the fourth came faster, and now no longer did his hands *need* movement. His robots served him, filled his tubes' reservoirs with carefully distilled essences of life—and year by year increased their numbers, ever more rapidly.

Now at last he was ready! His plans matured, and nothing was going to stop him from freeing the sorceress of the monolith to whom he was drawn by a bond greater than any other tie on earth. Those two titans of the Change understood each other, and if she still lived beneath that tower of dull metal above her living tomb, he would free her, did all mankind stand in the way!

Rank on rank his robot tanks waited, their ray-cannon pointing their electric eyes northward. Rank on rank the four-limbed mecho-men stood, waiting motionlessly for the day. His little automatic, self-thinking, rocket-

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throwing land-warships stood waiting too, the main strength of his robot-built army of—robots.

On the morning of *the day,* out of that jungle retreat of the first near-immortal, the first great trophopathologist, the mightiest mind alive on earth—out of that scene of centuries of super-toil, rolled the fruit of his effort, the product of a super-plan that could not fail.

Northward, irresistibly rolling on, clanking onward on caterpillar treads, stalking onward on great metal stilts, machine minds fixed on their first objective—the release of the mind buried alive beneath the great black monolith.

The fresh-faced girl sighed as she lifted her eyes from the light-devouring, sky-reaching tower of the ancient monolith.

"It is like the weight of time itself," she mused to her just-acquired husband. "Such a place we pick to spend our first days together."

"It is the right place. Shunned of all others, who might press themselves upon our privacy, spoil our love with their ignorant unkindness. The woman buried beneath that tower of darkness was the greatest of all the wonderful beings of the Change. It was the saddest day of all earth's sad days when the hate and jealousy and brutal revolt-against-reason of retarded men crystalized about her into the Crusade that halted the ferment of the Change."

"The legends say that she *was* love, love made into wonderful flesh by the magic of the great men of the Change..." the girl mused, staring again at the great black monument—rising out of the slow roll of the sand dunes, cyclopean, jet-black, and somehow lovely in its austerity as a black jewel carved from the dark sorrowing heart of the night.

"No one made her. She made herself into superior life, as much greater than men as we know them as an angel is greater than a ghost. She used the new medical methods of the Change and developed them in her own way to greater heights. She is said, in some of the ancient books I have read, to have been irresistible in beauty, and completely incomprehensible in her thought. They were afraid of her, in the same way that a devil fears God. Yet they conquered their fear enough to seal her up in her bomb-proof laboratory, and then erect that thing over her tomb. That thing to me represents the craven soul of men as they are when fear has utterly conquered their natural goodness, *panic fear.* I call it *The Tower of Fear!*"

"SHE IS SAID to be still alive," murmured the girl, smiling a little at the man that she should mention such a foolish thought, such a wild old tale.

"If there is truth in such legends, maybe she will look out on our honeymoon and bless us with happiness, shower charms and magic upon us," said the man, Bill Madden, falling in with the girl's mood.

"There used to be a city here, didn't there, Bill?"

"When the dunes move, you can still see the ruins. For a long time after this was built the city remained, but at last the desert moved in..."

"She must have been some woman, to make them so afraid! Do you suppose the time will come when men can face her and her plans; will have the courage to understand and accept such superiority?"

Bill rolled over, his eyes on the girl's face, dreaming of men with courage. "Men whisper, nights, to each other, of the woman called She, buried still-living beneath this awful

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weight. They whisper together of the mysterious and powerful life in her, so strong it could not die, but waits still until there will come a man who does not fear her who will release her. She was what we would be, if she had not been entombed here!"

"The city vanished," murmured Lea, the girl, "and the monument to her beauty, her power—remains! That seems such a wonderful thing!

"Do you suppose she *has* spent all that time, lying there alive, spending those years in awful thought, slow terrible years of thinking, immovable, living but dead?" The girl's voice was husky with the awe of the possibility.

"She was human change, mounted on a steed of lightning, she was growth and rapidity and ecstasy of life-strength..." Bill was quoting from the old book he had read about the woman who would not die, whom all men feared to face—

"I think they feared her and entombed her because she made them feel so puny and little." Lea's face was so lovely in her seriousness that Bill kissed her, and a long moment of peace passed across the sands where they lay.

After a time Bill's voice went on in silence, speaking of things men talk of of when their thoughts are turned to the mighty past of the Change and the atom war and the Crusade that ended all change. "Not all men abandoned the methods that made her what she was, Lea. They say some of the great mediciners of the world built a hidden citadel somewhere in the mountains, and retired there. They say that sometimes today they are seen, in airplanes, or at night in the mountains—giant men in black clothing. They are supposed to be called The Sons of Science, and to be working to start the Change again. They say the Dictator, Philip Kopek, fears the Sons of Science, and knows they could take the power away from him. But they are not ready..."

"I heard another story, about the first great scientist of all of them, what was his name?"

"Mantagna, he was called the father of the Change."

"Yes, he is supposed to be living, like She within the tomb here. Somewhere in the south he is hidden away, immortal and undying, and one day he will come out and make life wonderful for us all again."

"I GUESS such things are all old women's tales for the kids. There is no reason to believe life could last any longer for such people than for ourselves that I know."

The girl's eyes came from the dreaming and looking up at the black reach of the monolith, rested on Bill's face, softened and sweetened. She reached out and caressed his cheek.

"I believe you love that legend of She, you sound so sad when you say it cannot be true."

"I have dreamed of her, Lea. If I knew how, I would release her from that place. I cannot help believing in it, because I want it to be true. But it is so impossible to think that she could live beneath that weight."

The girl threw off the seriousness of their talk and sprang lithely to her feet, racing away across the bright sands toward the black base of the tower.

"Catch me if you can, slow-poke! I'm going to find the door of She's tomb, and go in and look and ask her how she controlled men to her will. Then you'll see who's boss!"

Bill jumped up and raced across the drifted sands after the fleeing girl. Her flying feet easily kept ahead of him. She came headlong against the dark buttress of changeless met-

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al, and her two hands caught her momentum and shoved her body aside as Bill plunged after.

He caught her flying bronze hair as she turned, and they wrestled for a moment, falling to the sand and rolling in laughter and mimic ferocity. Suddenly Bill ceased to struggle. The girl raised her head, her eyes following his strange stare.

At the base of the vast column, there within a few feet of their faces, an opening showed! Far, far in their eyes followed the round gleam of polished substance. Somehow that opening was pregnant with wonder to them.

"There must have been a door there once. It's gone, and the sands have blown away lately, uncovering the opening. Do you suppose . . . ?"

"That we may be the destined legendary ones who will release the Sorceress?" The girl's voice was husky, thrilling with excited wonder.

"I'm going in, you can wait or come along!" Bill decided, unsmiling, his brown square face serious with thought. "Just to see her, her tomb or her face or anything of her works—was once a sentence of death. Today—you and I can perhaps have what was once forbidden to everyone on earth!"

Excitedly they began to dig away the sand with their hands. When the hole was large enough, Bill slid his body within, and the girl followed.

"Lea, it is a stair, leading down! Take my hand, it gets darker."

TOGETHER, the two innocents of that ignorant time tip-toed down the stair to the Tomb of the legendary wizardess of that forgotten magic called science.

At the bottom of that long flight of stairs, their weight upon some ancient mechanism caused a light to flash into intolerable brightness. They crouched, frozen with fear. They did not know about switches and electricity except from legends.

As they crouched in the glare of the light, from the top of the stair came a sound, the scrape of a foot. Bill Madden whirled, looking up to the far point of light that was their entry place. A figure was outlined black against the light.

"It's Hairy! The crazy thing is mad at me for marrying you, Bill, I just *know* he's followed us! Who *else* would it be?"

Their fear of the light forgotten in the new fear of the descending footsteps, the young lovers stood clasping hands, listening and peering.

"You are probably right, Lea. He always followed you about, hoping you would take him. And hating me. Now that we're married, he would be here for only one reason. And that reason worries me, for he must have a weapon."

"He always carries his dart gun with him. Now he'll use it, on you! Bill you can't *let* him!"

Bill lookd about swiftly. At the far end of the chamber was an opening.

"Come on. We don't know what's down here, we'll run as long as there is any place to run to. When there's no way of escaping— I'll wait and jump him. Maybe I can get him before he gets me."

They passed quickly through the doorway, down a flight of stairs, down another and another. But now the seemingly endless stairs ended in a blank wall of rock. Bill stopped, looking desperately around. Here was no cover, and no way to avoid the creature, half man and half madness, who followed them. Lea had always been afraid of him. Bill knew why, well enough. He had killed men more than once, but there was little law anywhere now. Hairy James, who loved Lea like a dog, and hated all men like

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a wolf hates man, and for the same reasons.

As they stood before the blank wall, listening to the stealthy pad of Hairy's feet descending toward them in the darkness, a dull creaking sound made them whirl again to the wall that had stopped their progress. It was lifting on time-eroded mechanical balances, as it had been built to do. But to them the hidden mechanism was pure magic, a magic of blessed escape from their pursuer.

Lea gasped, and Bill's mouth dropped open. Below was a garden, such a garden as neither of them had ever seen in all their lives. Exotic plants, some fragile, others sturdily solid as cactus; wide dropping blooms with great scarlet lips, hanging golden fruits and wide limbed trees—all lit with many scattered, diamond-scintillant pillars of light upholding the terrible weight of all that monolith of dark cyclopean construction overhead above the sands they had left so short a time ago. So short a time, and yet their world had become so much less clear and plain to their minds. So many things they could not understand here, and their dull-witted pursuer still could be heard, slipping from step to step stealthily nearer.

BILL PULLED Lea through, and as they stepped down the last tall trio of steps, the stone of the doorway slowly lowered again.

"Fasten it some way, Bill! Stop him from opening it like we did!" Lea screamed in her fear at Bill, and he stooped to examine the base of the strange droopping door to see how it might be fastened.

At the side of the slab of stone that was the door a great lever projected along the wall. If he could prop that up, Bill saw the door would remain closed. He put his shoulder under it, held it up. "Get a prop from somewhere, Lea. This will hold him!"

Lea left his side, searching through the weirdly alive underground garden, and neither of them had time to wonder at the marvel of the place. Suddenly Lea screamed! Bill whirled, to see what now threatened. . .–

A thousand miles away, a rolling army of mechanisms equipped with the equivalent of thought crashed through a last barrier and spread out across the wild, half-peopled face of the continent. Before the rolling line of heedless might people ran screaming, climbing trees, throwing themselves into the rivers, crawling under the rude beds of their hovels.

The army of mechanical beings clanked on.

Back in the unpeopled forgotten green hell of jungle, the vast mind of Mantagna watched their progress on the telescreens, brooding impatiently over their slow progress due to the lack of roads fit to be called roads.

On the other side of the continent, two hundred of the Secret ones, in what they had thought was the last citadel of the forgotten sciences—heard the startling news of the advance of the mechanical army suddenly appearing from out of the jungle into what had been called Mexico. Their spy—babbling over his secret beamed radio transmitter—was incoherent, saying that the machines appeared to think!

One of the few remaining planes on earth rose into the air from their citadel, ordered to follow the weird army from afar and report constantly.

Bill saw that Lea was standing before a tall pillar of glass-like transparency, gazing at something within with wide eyes of horror and fear—and screaming without stopping.

He could not leave the great lever

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of the doorway without letting in the half-man that followed them. He could only yell: "Lea, come back here and stop that racket!"

Now Bill saw that out of that transparent pillar was streaming a radiance that bathed the body of Lea with a coruscating aura of force. Time became a leaden weight of indecision about Bill Madden, torn between the necessity of going to the screaming Lea, his wife, and the necessity of holding the bar of the door against the natural escape-movement of the stairs outside, where waited a man intent upon his death and Lea's capture.

INTO THAT aching, lengthy time of indecision, impinging upon his senses with a terrific strangeness that was terror and yet ecstatic unbelieving wonder at the Change, Bill's eyes saw, his mind tried to comprehend and believe...

Lea's body was growing. Her face was changing. Life strength and a vast vibrance of the essence of life's beauty was flowing into her from that strange pillar, and visibly her body changed as Bill strained there holding that door closed.

Against the streaming gold and silver and irridescence of that beam of radiance The Change was working over the body of Lea. Tall and taller, she stood now with the figure of a classic goddess of antiquity. Swiftly the change went on, and poor Bill's mind raced to understand—and gave up.

The screams had ceased and now rippling ecstatic laughter came from the strangely too-lovely figure of a woman that had been his little Lea. She turned, strode toward him lithely, and poor Bill's eyes glazed with wonder and awe. This woman could not be his wife. She was all of six feet tall!

As she came she picked up a long bar of silvery metal that lay alongside the misplaced stones of the walkway.

This bar she placed at the lever that Bill held, then took his hand, drawing his dazed self back with her toward the strange pillar of power that had metamorphosed her.

Within, Bill saw...and screamed with the infinite pleasure-pain of the seeing—She!

Screamed, and tried to grovel before the tremendous woman-form of the conjuring eyes, the magician's long, long hands; the sorceress' smiling, wise, wide and utterly desired lips, red as fire, curving luxuriously over the gleaming teeth.

Those eyes, that were still and calm and knowing, seeing them and pouring out the power of Change upon them for a reward to them for coming to her there in her living sepulchre.

That power, like flaming, fire-hot electric blood, coursed through Bill's muscles, energizing every fibre with strange twisting, throbbing growth, with energy of thought, of fecundity —of strange, wild, pulsing, devouring love of life, of all life and most especially of the new and greater Lea here beside him in this ecstasy of newness of being.

Bill understood now. This sorceress imprisoned beneath the vast monolith had been in truth a kind of Goddess of the Wisdom of Life. The old legend of the wonderful rewards she would give to her liberator were true—but still—it was very strange that all that was needed was for one to enter. But still she stood there before him in that crystal sheathing of transparency, immovable, awful in her too great beauty, in her majesty thus frozen by some power too great for her

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strength. Still she stood and waited for him to understand what he must, and poured out her power of Change upon him and his wife in the hope that they could finally comprehend what was needed for her release.

HIS EMINENCE, Lord Dictator of North America, Philip the Third, otherwise known as Philip Kopek, picked up the telegram from his desk where the orderly had lain it down.

"Army of strange machines crossing the Mexican desert. No men visible. Orders respectfully requested.

General James Branch
10608 Force, Ninth Route"

Lord Dictator lay down the message, trying to act as if it didn't matter. He figured he had about one week to get so far away no one would ever locate him. Machines, and an army of them! There hadn't been enough machines in operation at once to equip an army for a hundred years—or maybe two! He was hazy on times and dates and things.

He picked the telegram up again, and lit a match, watching the flame lick across the printing. It might save him a day, burning that thing. When that news became general knowledge, he wasn't going to have an army. They would be heading for the woods, and he wasn't going to let any grass grow under himself either. Dictators have enemies.

That was his first reaction. But after breakfast he felt better. He straightened his neck braid, rubbed his hands together, smiled at his young third wife across the table, who blushed and smiled back. He would have to give her more of his time, some way. She was an attractive child.

Those machines could mean only that the Secret Ones, the holders of the lost science of the past, were making a bid for power. They had been beaten before, and they could be beaten again. Then he could stay in his comfort and his pomp and his power, there would be no need to flee. Some lives would be lost, but why worry. It wouldn't be his life.

So an army moved south that morning, to bar the path of the strange army of machines. There would be no rule of science if they could help it. Not on this earth.

They were equipped with horses, who dragged rusty field pieces and baggage carts of ammunition. Some of the men carried ancient rifles. Most of them carried the modern dart guns, that worked with compressed air. There was little good ammunition manufactured for the older rifles, and the army owned it all. An age of unrepair had ruined the roads.

Moving slowly, the army of the Dictator began to cross the great American desert toward the ancient monolith that held down all the ghosts of the past. Anyone could guess that the first move of the strangers would be to try to release the sorceress imprisoned beneath the tower of black weight. Did she not symbolize all the evils of wisdom that had been put down by the valiant crusaders so long ago? It was not a deduction that the strange army was heading for the tomb of She. It was simple and obvious fact. Everyone knew that the soul of the ancient magic was buried there, and that it would not live again until the tomb was opened.

While the mutually unknown armies of two great rulers converged upon the black tower of forgotten metal over the wizardess of the past...

BILL MADDEN began to hear the voice of the woman whom death had been unable to defeat. Soft as

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the fingers of a ghost the meaning entered his mind from the bright energy flows about him. Soft and loving and dear as his mother's lullaby song, the thought of She flowed out to him, and he heard. Thought can convey mighty meanings in short packed sequences, and, listening, Bill opened the great cabinets beside the weird glass pillar that was Her coffin.

Within were vials of strange fluids, little bright mechanisms, an endless compact array of paraphernalia unknown to any other in the world but only Her. With that soft ghostly voice in his ears, Bill took out the little gleaming generator, attached the wires to the studs at the side of the pillar of glass, started the power throbbing through the shining wires encased in the glass. Then he poured the fluid of the great green vial into the open mouth of the graceful vase-like projection on the pillar. The soft voice ceased, and from the streaming radiance of the pillar began to flow greater and greater voices, the sound as of many beings growing into one. Her memories of the past great of Her time awakening in Her mind.

The green fluid dissolved the glass of her coffin swiftly, and at last the thing that Bill Madden had dreamed of as a child—the face and form of the wizardess She—was there before him with no barrier between. Weakly she stirred, then as the song of power from the little life force generator throbbed through the wires now bared by the dissolved plastic, and the pulsing field of its strengthening force throbbed through her body, she moved an arm, then advanced one long infinitely graceful leg, stood tottering, her hands outstretched looking like the fingers of eternity, so long, so pale and so very delicately indicative of the passage of time in their fine lines of dessication. Bill sprang forward to catch her as she tottered, and Lea sprang to the other side, each taking one long emaciated arm over their shoulders.

She was taller by a foot than either of them, even in their newly acquired growth, and they led her slowly to where her eyes pointed, a pavilion-structure of marble in the garden.

Here she rested upon a marble couch; the color flowed back into her shrunken cheeks, the fine lines began to disappear from her skin. Blood was pulsing through her now; slowly the tide of life increased, and after a few minutes she again essayed to rise, and again they aided her. From a locked coffer of stone in the pavilion she took a vial of golden fluid, drank greedily and long, and the fire of her eyes flashed on them, miraculously inspiring them to worship. To each of them she gave a drink from the tall ewer, then replaced it in the coffer, locking it and again hanging the key around her neck.

An hour ticked by, and still they heard her mind, thinking, thinking—questioning their own minds and getting the facts of the world of today all straight before her.

Above them the forces of the Dictator gathered, surrounding the column of the black weight above with cannon and soldiers. Far to the south a great rolling dust cloud marked the speeding mechanicals pressing nearer.

AN UNNOTICED speck in the east was the plane of the Secret Ones, the pilot speaking into his microphone giving the Citadel minute by minute reports.

Off in the mountains of the hidden Citadel, the Secret Ones gathered their power. They knew they must strike

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now—before the issue of this struggle was decided and some other had seized the power they had planned upon possessing for so long.

Out of the citadel rolled wave after wave of tanks, and gathered on their camouflaged air fields a thousand newly constructed planes, very different from the planes of the days of the Change—waited the word to plunge into the sky. The two hundred old men watched their followers leave.

Of all this the ancient brain of Mantagna, waiting alone in his jungle stronghold, knew nothing. His telescreens told him only what the electrical eyes of his mechanical juggernauts saw. He heard only the electrical substitute for thought which passed through the mechanical minds of his creations. On rolled the mighty robot army, and even Mantagna's time-weary soul thrilled a little to the resistless appearance of power they created. Soon, soon, the centuries of darkness would be lifted, and once again men would benefit from the secrets of life-growth he had developed.

Soon, soon, there would come to him the released sorceress of the Change, the woman who had taken his methods and outstripped him in their application to the enrichment of her own body's power, of her own fecund appreciation of the pleasures of life—the woman whose work had pioneered beyond the limits set by himself—on and on into the very borders of Godhead and immortality.

Soon the mighty power of life she had created deathless within herself would be freed once again, and he himself would learn those things which for lack of knowing had doomed him to an eternity of motionless slow decay beneath the vast weight of his overgrown brain case.

UNNOTICED by the three figures in the marble pavilion of the subterranean garden, the metal bar which Lea had placed beneath the great weighted lever of the automatic doorway sank slowly into the soft earth of the garden bed. Inch by inch it sank, slowly tipped and at last toppled over.

Outside the great door, the hairy dark-faced half-man of the retrogrades movd impatiently, his foot pressed the last step of the stair, the door before him began to slowly lift, creaking upward. Unnoticed, he darted in; the great door sank again into place.

The hairy, burly figure darted left into the screening leaves, began to move toward the pavilion where the sound of Lea's voice, excitedly questioning, was to him a clear beacon of desire. The deeper tones of Bill Madden's answering voice reached him. He scowled deeply as the rage engendered by his jealousy boiled in his blood. From his belt he tugged the big dart-pistol which was the one tool he knew well how to use, his only asset in the dim world of his ignorance.

Crouching, he scuttled closer and closer, stopping to look at the three figures over the sights of his gun, scuttling softly closer to get clear of the obscuring leaf barriers between him and his hated objective.

Bill and Lea were engrossed, the clear, enchanting antique-accented words of the immortal woman spinning swiftly for them a picture of the world as it would be if she once again was able to lead men along the paths she had pioneered into the mysteries of the causes of life-change.

Her own sensitive mind was engrossed with the two charming innocent lovers who had inadvertently rescued her from her living death of waiting. How good, and what fine material was still alive with them for

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her wizardry to build upon! If the race of man had decayed no more than had these...what might yet be done! Glittering fancies born of the imagined possibility of full development of the race under her guiding hands sprang swift, one after another, through her newly awakened imagination, her sensual fecund cells of thought filling out the ghosts of vision with pulsing, desiring, passionate, colorful life—trained, and growing into such progress as had never been before.

Hairy James lifted the dart gun—he had silently pumped the air chamber to full pressure. First the man, then this strange, lean gigantic woman—and he would be unopposed in his possession of Lea. Here in this hidden garden he could have his will of her, and when he was weary of her—what simpler than to leave her here where no one ever entered. Locked in here, she would be his possession for as long as pleased him. Carefully he drew the sights to a line upon Bill Madden's chest, his finger tightening on the trigger.

OVERHEAD, the ancient ordnance of Dictator Philip Kopek the Third swiveled, tilted, and the cannoneers waited the word. The officer's hand swung down, cutting the air, and along the line of guns the lanyards jerked, a thunder and flame and shaking recoil ran along the curved front. The shells sped skyward, arced down toward the gleaming line of caterpillar-treaded strange machinery which had so mysteriously sped across the country out of nowhere.

The salvo was badly aimed, the exploding shells plowed a long line of shell-holes before the advancing weight of motored mechanical minds.

Automatically the encased electronic brains reacted, the electric eyes swept the landscape, and leaping from their squat turrets came ray after ray, sweeping in deadly arcs of constantly corrected all-covering pattern across the intervening space, swept nearer to the Dictator's line of ancient guns and waiting cavalry. As the hissing beams, the tracks of them leaving long streaming lines of molten glass across the sands, reached the first living matter and burnt it to smoking collapsed crisps of cooked meat about their weapons, the "army" of the ruler of North America took to its heels, scattered in complete and sudden route before the stolidly advancing, unharmed array of deadly power.

Watching his telescreens, the great eyes of Mantagna filled with tears of amusement at their fight, tears that were suddenly not amusement but sadness that the once mighty civilization of the continent had sunk to this comic-opera masquerade of a military organization.

On the one telescreen that still functioned in his palace, the building that had once been the United States Mint, Philip Kopek watched the flight of his men, turned away to pack his bags. He would take mountaineer's costume and the two gasoline cars that were his prized possessions, and head for the hunting lodge in Canada. Speed would be his only safety, he knew. He must keep ahead of the news of defeat and change, or his enemies would intercept him before he reached hiding. The store of ancient gasoline he had been hoarding for twenty years, since it had been found.

The line of robot machines clanked on toward the dark monolith. The motionless form of Mantagna brooded with his great tragic eyes upon the vast dark needle of night and weight and sorrow showing now before the sending eyes of his robots.

AND UP from the hidden airfields of the Secret Ones flashed a

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thousand bright-winged deadly bombing planes—to intercept the threat that had wiped out the puppet ruler they had allowed to exist, for his existence kept their own power secret by his inept lack of curiosity—guarded them for recurrence of the ancient madness of crusade against science which had wiped out their forefathers.

This newly appeared power would learn to reckon with their own claims upon the rule of the continent. Whoever they were, the unseen men within those clanking monsters of unknown construction, they would respect the existence of the Secret Ones.

Too long had they planned to possess the science entombed beneath the black monolith to let it fall into alien hands now. It was the one great repository of knowledge from the past—though none of the descendants of the hidden men of science believed in the legend of the undying woman within the tomb. If anyone was going to open that ancient storehouse, if anyone was going to violate that shrine of the wisdom of the past—it would be themselves. Too long had they lain hidden and waiting. Their hour had struck.

The Sons of Science, as the Secret Ones' followers called themselves, were big men. The methods of the medical wizard Mantagna, though incompletely known to their ancestors, had yet been searched out the ruins after the great Crusade, borne into hiding, there studied and brought partially into use. The result had been that their size and rate of growth, their adaptibility, their rate of evolution, had been accelerated, and generations of this development had produced a race of men eight feet in height, with wide high foreheads, fine muscles, clean health, keen active minds of superior ability. They had studied the past, and had developed their own new science within their citadel hidden in the mountains of what had been Kentucky. There, in the "Smokies", where civilization had never penetrated deeply even at its height, they had built up a new race of men, few in number, but powerful in their superior abilities. Proud, they had looked down upon their retrograde fellow men sprawled in chaotic ignorance across the ruined face of the earth.

Their flight into battle was an ecstatic release of their pent-up energies, and the gleaming planes were impossible to control at first as they soared and wheeled over the citadel, then rocketed off toward the great desert where the monolith brooded darkly over the drifting sands of the past.

But soon their first joy in too long action settled into anticipation, and the long columns formed precision in the sky—sped on to battle with the enemy whom they did not know.

THE EARTH rocked and shuddered under the bombs of the first wave, the tall monolith tilted in its age-old cradle.

Watching, Mantagna's great eyes filled with horror and the accumulated frustration of his time-worn soul was a horror in his tragic distorted face as he saw the bombs curve down, down—and burst in a dreadful earth-rocking blast about his centuries of effort—his hope for earth's freedom—his so-long-labored-over mechanicals. The huge beetle-like bodies were hurled right and left, turned turtle, their treads spinning futilely. Into his ears came the strange eerie keening of metal minds feeling electric pain of shock. The scalding tears streamed down his ruined ancient face as he saw the work of his centuries of te-

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nacious planning wrecked in one blow. The long rays of his robot servants lashed upward automatically, accurate as clockwork, centering the whirling motes far above and sending them spinning down in great hurtling spirals of flame—falling—falling—the Sons of Science, destroyed by the first of the great medical discoverers of the secrets of life.

Mantagna cudgled his vast weary brain for the answer to the enigma... Who were these attackers? How could he stop the battle and come to terms when they gave him no opportunity?

AS HAIRY JAMES pressed the trigger of his dart gun, the first shock of the exploding bombs shuddered through the caverns, and the dart flashed between She and Bill, caroming off the marble of the seat. Bill leaped to his feet, his eyes darting for the source of the dart. He had about one full second, long enough for their attacker to pump up the reservoir of his air pistol. A slight ripple in the mass of leaves led him to plunge into the shrubbery on the chance that he could come to grips with the half-man before he fired again and more accurately.

The creature rose up ahead of him, one hand pumping desperately at the lever in the butt of the gun. Bill left his feet in a long dive, his arms clutched the waist of the half-man, they rolled together among the gnarled roots of the subterranean garden's plants. The soft humus of the centuries-old undisturbed leaf mould coated the two struggling bodies with black. Over and over they rolled, Bill desperately trying to get a hammerlock on the strong arm of Hairy, his two hands clasping the wrist while with his elbow he applied leverage, forcing the arm back and around.

Hairy crashed his fist again and again into Bill's face, surging back, arching his back desperately to disengage his twisted arm. Bill hung like a leech, forcing the arm around steadily, bit by bit, and taking his punishment with snarls of pure rage.

Tall, striding now with an effortless grace, the freed sorceress of the past came to the two struggling bodies. Her eyes blazed, her anger at the unprovoked attack was the same anger that had scalded her mind with futile rage at the stupidity of those who had entombed her—in a time that seemed to her but days ago—so swiftly had the dreaming unconscious suspension of life passed for her. She remembered how she had humbled herself to obtain even the privilege of a living death, constructing the apparatus with her own hurried hands before their permission was revoked.

The strange, powerful female from the period of the Change, bending over the struggling men, made a sudden gesture with her eloquent hands. Her eyes dilated, Bill caught a glimpse of her angry eyes, and they seemed to grow, blotting out her contorted yet glorious face as he felt the soft soil fall away from beneath him. He threw his legs about, reaching for a fulcrum—to find himself floating in the air—floating! Surprise and unbelief, wonder—made his arms relax their grasp, and Hairy floated away from him as he slammed a blow at his face. There they floated, ten feet from the ground—helpless. The strange woman made a gesture again, and Bill descended slowly, his feet resting once more on the earth.

"Just what do you call that kind of magic?" asked Bill, with astounded eyes upon the now calm face of his newly awakened friend.

"IT WAS ONCE called psychic levitation, and it is an example of

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the way that all force and energy responds to thought—if you know how to think." She smiled that infinitely enchanting smile of hers. Bill's poor head spun with the fascination of the vital energy of womanhood that flooded from her every glance... Lea took his arm, laughing up at him.

"You looked so foolish, floating like that. You couldn't imagine what had happened!""

Bill bent and picked up Hairy's dart gun, glanced at the magazine of tiny darts, filled with venom, he knew. A venom called curare, made from roots, by the bands of wild people who roamed outside the cities of the dying world.

As they stood listening to the thunder and shuddering shocks of the bombs overhead, a shock vastly greater sent great cracks along the time-eaten walls of the garden, pieces of rock fell from the roof; with a roar, the whole cavern about them collapsed. Only darkness and silence and tumbled shards and fragments marked the place where the ancient time-sheltered garden of past wonder had for so many centuries resisted all hazard.

The vast black needle of the monolith, tilted by a base hit from a bomb, had tipped, gradually slanting more and more as the battle progressed from sharp-cut attack and defense to an all-out whirl of incomprehensible swift action.

At last, the supports gradually weakened by the recurring explosions, the vast needle of black forgotten metal had leaned far over, crashed downward, falling along the lines of embattled tank-robots like the body of a God of Darkness, fallen...

Mantagna, watching the battle helplessly, immovable in his vast protective sphere, saw the slowly tilting terrible weight of the monolith at last crash down upon the earth above the crypts he knew lay beneath—and his great tragic eyes wept, his paralyzed fingers twitched convulsively, great sobs rent the silent air of his crystal haven.

The mind that he hoped still lived beneath that tower to ignorance, that mind he had hoped might free him from his prison of helplessness with her knowledge of the life-methods he had pioneered and she had developed—that mind must be at last irrevocably destroyed.

Now he threw himself into guiding the robot army in savage efficient maneuvers, the rage that had been building in his striving mind for so long flooded him, rage against the mad destructive nature of man. Whoever these attackers might be, they would pay for destroying the last great mind of the people of the Change.

So the Sons of Science found their proud armada of shining battle planes shot out of the air. Days later, when the first waves of their tank forces reached the scene, they found them no less futile against the masterly handling of the strange unpeopled steadily advancing line of machines, trundling on and on, seemingly without aim or reason, bent only on seeking out opposition and destroying it.

THE PEOPLE of the citadel decided to again draw their cloak of hidden camouflage about their existence; again the covers of growing shrubbery were drawn over their airfields, and the war tanks they had sent out were abandoned, the drivers picked up by planes and flown away from the vision of Mantagna's telescreens.

Now the might of his robot army turned, retraced their tracks, gathered

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about the fallen monolith upon the desert.

A great digging machine began to revolve its blades, boring a passage into the sand, throwing a great spout of dust and flying earth from its rear. Down, down, delicate instruments reaching ahead with mechanical senses.

With fatalistic sorrow mingling with wild impossible hope, Mantagna's great eyes watched the screens, noting each tiny variation of temperature and penetrative ray rebound, noting the density of the mass ahead of the mechanical mole. Little electric eyes passed and repassed their vision beams through all the rock ahead, following the lines of lesser resistance that marked the fragment filled crevices of the collapsed tunnels.

The great blades of the digger bit nearer and nearer to the center of the fallen cavity that had housed the living sepulchre of She. Nearer and nearer to the three silent bodies waiting there. Waiting...

The woman whose very name had been lost by the centuries stirred, screamed as her broken limbs sent great shocks of pain into her supersensitive nerve centers. Then her eyes gathered sanity out of the familiar darkness, her psychic powers asserted themselves, and the rocks that had crushed down about them lifted—her limbs were free!

Watching the scene, old Mantagna's vast tired eyes widened to still greater expanse as he saw the big rock fragments one by one lift and float free—one by one tug release and slowly mount into the sky—mount and pause there, waiting!

Some wild surmise in his mind raised the flame of the impossible hope in his breast. His thought directed the robots above, and a questing beam of thought-communicative energy swept penetrating through all the subrock of the cradle of the fallen monolith.

THE SOFT sweet voice of She came to him with a shock of delight that nearly stopped his worn and shriveled heart. But the leaping pulse of synthetic nutrients in the plastic tubes that were now his veins kept the life in the mind that had once been man.

"Who are you, digging and searching this tomb that has been my home?"

"I am Mantagna, and if you are She whom I seek, you need to hear no more to know all there is to know about me." Mantagna's mind answered over the thought conductive beams, though the wild hope in his heart he was sure could be only the illusions of madness.

The glad, utterly human cry with which his thought was greeted by the mind at the end of the questing beam told Mantagna all the glad wild wonderful truth he had been seeking so long. The woman lived—

"Oh, my girl, my own dear daughter...the time has been so terrible. Little Sue, grown beyond me, Sue, I have needed you so much! Come to me, daughter."

"I will come, father, I will come. Wait, oh wait!"

So it was that the death of two lovers brought to the world of defeat and chaos again the glad days of the Golden Age, and the obelisk of ancient metal stands upright once again—and upon it is a tablet of gold, engraved with these words:

"This is a monument to Bill and Lea, lovers who ushered into life the age of happiness in which you live. Their courage and their death gave you life worth having."

THE END

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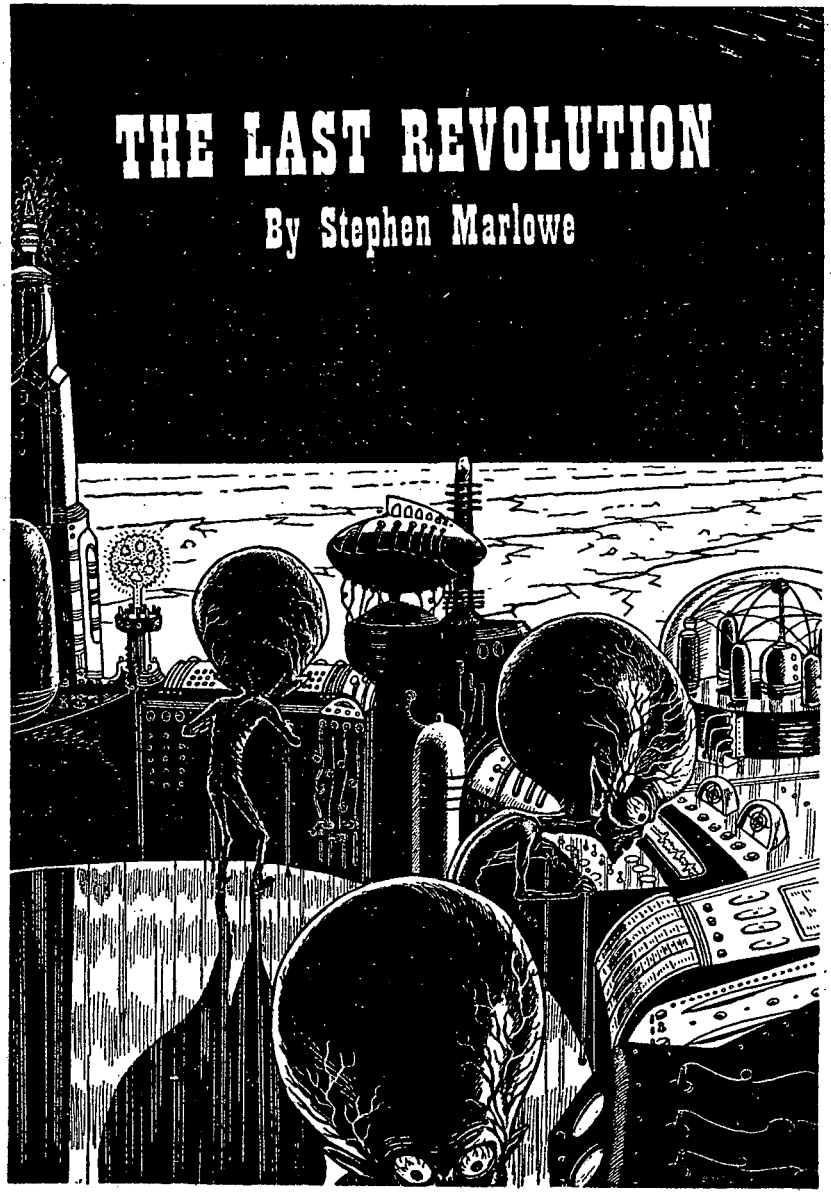
THE LAST REVOLUTION

By Stephen Marlowe



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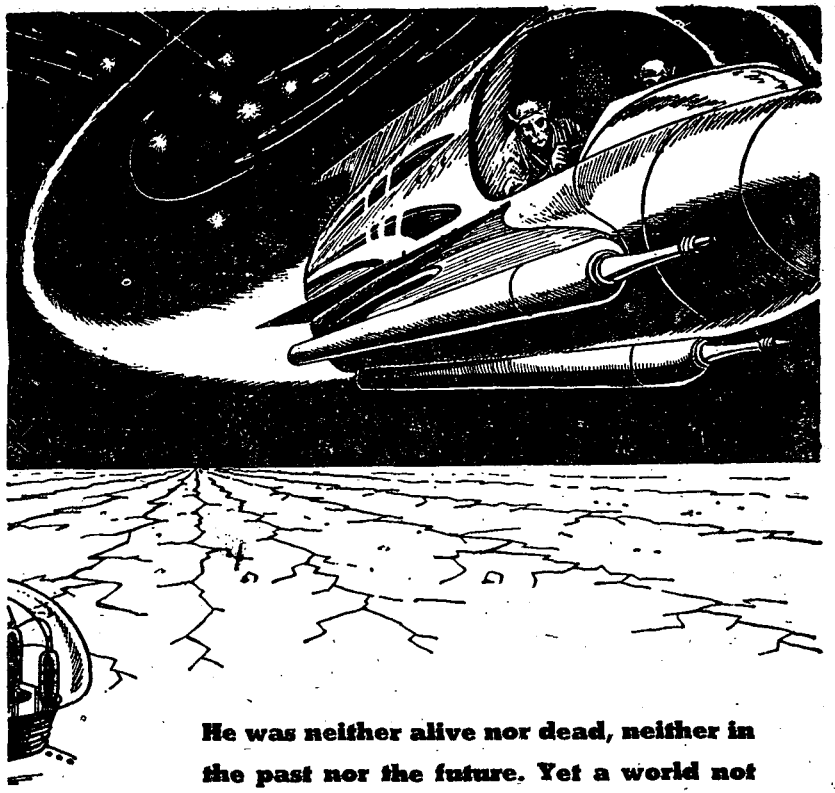

He was neither alive nor dead, neither in the past nor the future. Yet a world not yet born must die unless he stayed alive!

IF DRAYTON hadn't overslept he would not have come whizzing down the Sawmill River Parkway at seventy, barely braking to forty or fifty at the dangerous turns, and taking them on two wheels at that. If he hadn't overslept, in fact, he could have beaten the storm into New York altogether. He would have had plenty of time to change for dinner in the Carlton's big apartment. Now, Mary and her dad would be waiting....

Drayton took out an already damp handkerchief and wiped the fog from his windshield. Damn, it was hard to see! The rain swept down in great driving sheets, a wall of gold-flecked gray where Drayton's headlights cut into the night.

He braked slightly for the turn

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ahead. He felt the Olds rise giddily on two wheels and then begin a long skid. Muttering to himself, he turned with the drag, slowly. Ahead and to the left he could see two yellow orbs gleaming balefully in the darkness. Approaching headlights. He heard the loud warning of a horn and the screeching of tires on drenched asphalt. The headlights came on, lurching from side to side, intent upon him!

Drayton had heard that in the moment before death your whole life runs through your mind like an impossibly fast motion picture. For him, at least, this was not true. He could feel death's cold breath on his face, but only one thought ran over and over again in his mind: *why the hell did I oversleep and get into this mess?*

The headlights seemed to spread apart as the car drew closer, and Drayton felt that the blackness between them would swallow him forever. He wondered idly if the sound of impact would register in his mind before the brief instant of pain before death, laughed at the ridiculousness of the problem. But he heard the grinding clash of metal on metal and the angry tinkle of shattering glass—then steeled himself for the pain.

He felt—nothing!

He floated serenely through the roof of his car, out into the rain. It wasn't wet!

"I'm dead," he said, almost disappointed at the anticlimactic nature of his demise.

Briefly, in the darkness, he thought he saw his body twisted against the shattered steering wheel. Then, with the car and the highway and the rain, it disappeared.

AROUND HIM, utter blackness, like depths of extra-galactic space that have never known light. But straight ahead there was a glow, extremely bright, yet shedding no luminosity on Drayton's void. A coruscation of enclosed brilliance, a curtain of selfish flame that cut off the void but gave it not the flicker of an afterglow.

To this sped Drayton on unknown wings!

Into the flames he plunged, passed through, was only aware of a not-unpleasant tingling.

He sat down hard. He blinked.

Gone was the blackness. Gone the curtain of flame. He sat on a broad expanse of red-gray rock, an endless tableland of ash-of-rose. Drayton didn't know why, but the rock gave him the feeling of hoary age. Polished and broken and flattened by how many countless eons of wind?

He stood up. Wherever he was, whatever had happened to him, it was pointless to remain idle. Of course, he was dead. He hoped the shock wouldn't be too great for Mary, so sudden like this. Yet, how could he be dead? He had always thought of death as nothing but an eternal sleep. He got the shock of his life when he tried to pinch himself, the way they do in melodramatic fiction, felt—nothing! Wildly, he kicked his foot against an outcropping, half expecting it to plow right through. It did not, it met resistance and halted. But it didn't hurt.

For a moment, hysteria clawed at the fringes of his mind. Sobbing, he looked around. A rosy glow pervaded the air. The sun was high in the sky. No—not the sun. For one thing, its sphere was too big, a silver dollar at arm's length. For another, it was red, a smouldering crimson globe too big and too high in the sky.

Drayton scanned the horizon slowly, realized he was the only moving thing on the great red plain. But off in the distance, so far that it lay shrouded in crimson haze, he could see a gleaming mound above the level of the plain. Artificial—man-made? Perhaps. A city? Drayton started to run.

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HE COULD not say how long it took him to reach the mound. He estimated that two or three hours had passed at least, but the strange sun overhead remained an unmoving crimson globe. The fact that the huge red sun's heat did not bother him, the fact that the dry winds did not irritate his skin although they sent tiny particles of ochre sand flying against it, the fact that his throat was dry but did not suffer with the pangs of thirst—all this confused him. He was dead, then: he had to accept that. But this place of red rock did not fit any of the mythological descriptions of either heaven or hell.

As a mining engineer, he had been around. He had broken dry and flaky bread with the Tartars on the barren Gobi; he had spent weary months on the hot wastelands of the Sahara; he had even felt the icy chill of Antarctica with Admiral Byrd and the Navy. But never had he known such utter desolation as he saw now on the plain of the red sun. Flat rose-ash and ochre, here and there dotted with an outcropping of rocks of deeper red and an occasional boulder of coppery saffron glinting metallically in the sunlight, it stretched out, unchanged, to the horizon.

Except for the mound. The mound was perhaps half a hundred yards in diameter, a perfect hemisphere of crimson. It played tricks with Drayton's eyes. Sometimes he thought he could almost see through it, see strange flickerings and shadows, but at other times it looked dully opaque like the rocks around it. Gingerly, Drayton felt of its surface, smooth as glass, and warm.

Came a faint whirring sound, like the faraway grinding of great machinery. The mound pulsed once and then again with a core of weird amethyst glowings, like a gem newly exposed to light. Strident became the whirring—a warning! It soared higher and higher until the shrillness passed to a register too high for human ears.

Drayton stepped back, waited. The mound stirred. It moved!

As if on a huge axis parallel to the plain's surface, it began to rotate slowly. A gap of unthinkable depths where the mound had moments before joined the rock in utter adjacency....

Up and back rotated the mound, slipping soundlessly into the stone on either side. Drayton stared upon an unfathomable gulf, a smooth-walled shaft, leading to—what?

THE VOICE startled him. He realized that he had heard no human sound, not even the gentle slap-slap of his own feet against the rock, since the accident. Somehow he sensed that the voice was more a part of his mind than of the environment, direct communication with his brain rather than through the medium of sound waves and air. A pleasant enough voice, but tired—infinitely tired.

"Drop down the shaft, Mr. Drayton."

"Down?" he croaked hoarsely, aware that his spirit or whatever it was had a voice of its own, and a badly frightened one. "I'd fall, I'd die—"

"Please. Relax, be calm. You're already dead, you know that. Just drop down the shaft." The voice soothed, coaxed....

Why not? He could feel certain things, like the rocks around him or the surface of the dome. But he felt no pain, nothing unpleasant. And why should the voice, whatever it was, trick him? He couldn't stay forever on the red plain, couldn't just stand there waiting for the crack of doom. He chuckled without mirth. His own personal crack of doom had already come in a grinding crash on the Sawmill

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River Parkway.

"Down the shaft, Mr. Drayton."

Air from the abyss seemed cool and damp as Drayton breathed it, with the faintest musky suggestion of vegetation. Drayton shrugged, stepped out over the giddy depths.

He fell—slowly. Floated down past the smooth, silent walls. Overhead, he heard a whirring. The mound rotated back on its axis, closed over the abyss. Down floated Drayton.

It was hard to see or hear anything through the pulsing which came suddenly to his temples, the roaring which pushed in at his ears. Over him crept a giddiness such as a sea-sick sleep-walker might feel on a narrow, storm-tossed bark. Drayton sank back into a womb of whirling black. . . .

HE AWOKE. He lay on a pallet of unknown material, metallic, yet soft as a feather bed.

"I am glad you are awake." Again, the voice ignored the connection his ears made with the outside world and spoke directly to the area of his brain reached by the auditory nerves.

At the foot of his bed Drayton saw a chair. But his eyes hadn't yet focused fully: the chair swam in and out of a sea of fog.

Someone sat upon it, watching him. He concentrated, swept the fog back and away. What he watched wasn't quite human!

The man's body was scrawny, so scrawny that Drayton thought it must have been held together by wires. And short. Standing, the man's head would hardly reach Drayton's shoulders. His neck hung forward and down, as if it were an effort to hold it erect, and atop it Drayton saw a head half again as big as it should have been, translucent of skin, almost, with great dark veins throbbing over the temples. The eyes were big and watery, the nose a tiny upthrust dot, the mouth a small pucker. There was no hair anywhere.

"I am Jobijed," the creature said. The lipless pucker of a mouth did not move.

"Joe Big Head," Drayton repeated, for that's what it had sounded like. He laughed.

"Drayton," Jobijed said, "we have waited long for you." Telepathy, Drayton thought idly; that could explain the voice which was not a voice at all. "The storm, the crash, your close affinity with the time-cycle—not an easy situation to find. We plucked you here—"

"Where?" Drayton demanded, sitting up. "Where the devil am I?" The strangeness hit him, all at once. It left him angry.

"Slowly, slowly," Jobijed admonished. "Don't tax your new body."

"My what?"

"Your new body. You died, Drayton. How could you have lived through that accident? We plucked your *elan*—call it a soul if it will make you feel better—through the corridors of time, duplicated your body here, down to the last possible detail—made it stronger, if anything. But you're dead in your own time, make no mistake about that. You may indeed be forced back by an affinity over which we have no control, but it will be to the broken ruin of your old body.

"Stay with us in the future, Drayton, the far future of your own world, the unborn tomorrow of your race."

DRAYTON slammed his leg down, striking the floor heavily with his foot. He winced. That, at least, was no lie. He was whole again, a soul and a body. Once, in Arabia, he had been knifed in a street brawl, still carried the scar under his right arm. He pulled the coverlets away, looked

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—saw the thin white line. He could doubt nothing, not with the evidence for what Jobijed had told him piling up on all sides.

But it all left him a little weak. "The future? You mean through time? You mean the future of my race? You?"

"Exactly," Jobijed said, still sitting as motionless in his chair as when first Drayton had seen him. "I am a man, a human being, one of your own kind. There are only three of us—the last of your race, in desperate trouble. In need of a saviour: you, Drayton!"

"Look," Drayton said, "I'm confused. I died, hours ago. You say you snatched away my soul, on the point of death. To the future. What future? What for? I won't say this is a gag: too many things can't be explained. But I don't know. The future—"

"Five hundred million years," Jobijed told him blandly. "Half a billion years in your reckoning. A hundred million years ago, the earth ceased its rotation. The sun is old, old—and we face it all the time, parched and red, a dying earth, a fleck of cosmic dust, an aging mote, and three last men—in danger."

Drayton found it hard to associate the word humanity with Jobijed—his thoughts said Joe Big Head and he smiled. The last of a great race, Jobijed and two others, Drayton's race—half a billion years in the unborn corridors of tomorrow. If they were in trouble, how could he help them? He asked Jobijed; asked what the small-brained progenitor of these three could hope to do that they couldn't.

"Yes," Jobijed agreed, "our brains are great. Our science would astound you. Half a billion years, and most of it lost, but still there is enough for what we must do. Yet, we are powerless—"

The door opened. Two duplicates of Jobijed came tottering into the room, supporting each slow step with two great canes. If anything, their heads were larger. Jobijed was a baby!

The newcomers sat down, silently, on two other chairs. They stared at Drayton with their big watery eyes, appraising. The heads nodded almost imperceptibly on scrawny necks.

"...our problem," Jobijed was saying. "Would you help the human race if you could?"

IT STILL appeared somewhat ludicrous to Drayton. He could not associate concepts of humanity with these monstrosities. Yet he knew he was being unfair. It was an unthinkable gap—five hundred million years. If they were human, he did owe them something. If...

A clamorous buzzing in Drayton's ears, like countless swarms of bees in flight. He looked at Jobijed, saw right through him! The whole room had become tenuous, hazy, like one half of a photographic double-exposure. The other half...

Drayton saw the four broad lanes of the Sawmill River Parkway, while yet he saw the room. On the bed was his body, his new body, Jobijed and the others hovering over it, examining it gravely. They faded.

Only the parkway. It was morning and the bright yellow glow of the sun felt good. A crowd, police, the wreck of two automobiles.

Abruptly, Drayton felt sharp lances of pain, spears of molten agony. He lay crumpled behind the wheel of his Oldsmobile. He moaned.

"Still alive," someone muttered.

A figure bent over him, prodded, stood up. "It's no use," he said. "The man's dying. I can't understand what kept him alive so long. Every bone in his chest is broken."

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Drayton felt the pain leave. Now the highway grew tenuous, now Jobijed and his room superimposed. They battled for him, the two worlds—Drayton could sense that. Death in one, death only moments away, death for his old body. And what in the other? What in the far new world with his new, unhurt body? He did not know, but he wanted to live. "Jobijed!" he cried. "Jobijed, bring me back!"

A tugging at every atom of him, then the familiar blackness, the curtain of flame....

Drayton gazed on Jobijed's huge impassive face. He had returned. He felt himself—his spirit—glide forward, enter his new body. He was trembling all over.

"I feared it," Jobijed said. "Your own time still has power over your... soul. You must fight it, Drayton. You died that morning, over half a billion years ago."

Drayton shook his head. "No. I still live back there. But I—"

JOBIJED shrugged scrawny shoulders, leaning heavily on his cane. "A moment, two. You'll be dead. The accident was fatal. But here you have life, and the chance to save your race."

"Save it from what?" Drayton wanted to know. He could doubt no longer. He accepted the thoughts Jobijed poured into his mind. Maybe in that way he could grow firm roots here in the future. He did not want to go back to pain and death—ever.

"Here on the sun side," Jobijed told him, "there is no life except what my companions and I manufacture synthetically in this cavern. It is a dead world. Likewise, the dark side of earth is dead. Terribly cold, a world of storm and solid gasses. But in the belt between, in the rim of twilight that fringes the dark side, there is life. The air is thin, but deep in the twilight valleys it hangs heavily, like a shroud, over a wicked spawn."

"Your enemies!" Drayton cried. What sort of creatures, half a billion years in the future, to usurp Earth's dominion from Earth's last men? Drayton could not know, not now, not yet—but he felt blind hatred for them.

Jobijed felt that hatred. "Good! They would have the science of our cavern. They would take it and destroy us. Animals in your time, Drayton, they evolved into creatures of limited intelligence. They are evil. You must destroy. Destroy them, Drayton!"

Drayton frowned. What on earth could he do that they could not?

Jobijed told him. Obviously, the last three men—the concept still frightened Drayton—had science aplenty. But their problem was a paradox. They simply did not have the proper mobility.

"Consider, Drayton. My companions, myself, we cannot indulge in unlimited physical activity. Too much of it and the spinal cord might snap. Yes, it's weak in us—and our heads are heavy, heavy....

"We've tried robot warfare," Jobijed continued. "But we were outsmarted. The robots cannot maneuver in the twilight valleys, they lack sufficient sentience. We can create life, yes—like your new body, Drayton. But it must have motivation, and this is a law of science: a soul can only be lifted from its body and placed in a new one on point of death, violent death. The situation is a rarity, and we must happen upon it at precisely the right instant. A moment too soon, a moment too late—useless.

"We have you, Drayton—a saviour. We will give you the weapons. With you to lead our ships, we can destroy the usurper in a single day!"

DRAYTON sat back, not saying anything. He wished he had a

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cigarette and a good stiff shot of liquor, because suddenly something bothered him. He said: "That's fine for you. I guess I'll do the job for you. I'd be the biggest traitor humanity ever saw if I didn't. But then what? What happens to me? If I go back to my own time, it's to a broken body—and death. If I stay here..." He shrugged eloquently enough, raking his eyes around the austere room, over his three hosts. "What the hell can I do for the rest of my life?"

The almost lipless pucker of Jobijed's mouth began to tremble slightly, and it was a while before Drayton understood the movement for laughter. Jobijed bent forward with his two companions, and they entered into silent communion. It was eerie. Drayton watched, knew that they were conversing, but they could have been a trio of silent statues.

After a time, Jobijed's voice hummed in Drayton's head. "Earth is a dying planet—"

"You're telling me!"

"No, listen. We have the ability to travel through space; we've had it for centuries. There are young planets and fair on a nearby star. I believe you would call it...Alpha Centauri. They could harbor human life."

"Why don't you go there?"

Silence for a moment. Then: "We're old, Drayton. Old. And we won't live forever. Destroy our enemies so we can live our few remaining eons in peace and contemplation, and—"

"And what?" Drayton was angry again. Not at Jobijed and his companions, but at the situation itself. He was stuck here in the far future, with only the prospect of a drab, dull existence. He'd live and grow old here in the caverns under the surface of a dying planet, with nothing to do. "What will you do?" he said, his voice getting louder. "Pack me off to your Alpha whatizzit? What'll I do there by myself? I'll go nuts, that's what."

"PATIENCE, Drayton," Jobijed's pucker was trembling again. "There was an accident in your year 1953, similar in a lot of ways to your accident. A young female was swimming at a place called Jones Beach—you know the place?"

Drayton said he knew it well. A pang of nostalgia shook him. He remembered how he loved to watch the surf come thundering in from the Great South Bay. But the Bay, the Ocean itself, was gone how many millions of years?

"The Guardians of the place—"

Drayton knew he meant life-guards.

"The Guardians," Jobijed continued, "decided that the surf was too rough for swimming. They called everyone out. But the young female ignored them, was caught by an underfoot—is that the term?"

"Undertow," Drayton told him. But he sat forward, interested now.

"She drowned, Drayton. The Guardians could not rescue her in time. We did the same for her as we did for you, took her *elan* here and reconstructed her body. She waits now, asleep. We haven't spoken to her yet. She waits—why don't you awaken her, Drayton? We have...made certain preparations."

Drayton was feeling almost cheerful. It had crossed his mind a few minutes before that he'd never even touch a woman again, never see one. Now—well, now it might not be so bad after all. He almost felt like a heel when he thought of Mary. But Mary was dust for half a billion years, and the sooner he got used to that, the better it would be.

He stood up and stretched. "Lead on," he said, whistling.

They had made preparations, all right. Drayton found himself in a small bedroom, and when he looked

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in the mirror he realized for the first time that he was naked. He found a shower stall off in an alcove got under an invigorating spray.

When he finished, a safety razor and a mug of shaving cream were waiting for him. He could sense alien workmanship—the handle was a little too long, the blade a bright orange. But Jobijed and his companions had observed back in the twentieth century, had tried to recreate a world for Drayton.

Smiling, he shaved, then stepped back into the bedroom. On the bed, clothing was laid out for him. He began to laugh, and soon he was laughing so hard that tears came to his eyes. There was a white dinner jacket, a pair of midnight blue formal trousers, a maroon cummerbund. That was all—not even a shirt.

He shrugged. He'd feel a lot better in tweeds, with a shirt. Shoes and socks, too—but hell, the floor was pleasantly warm enough. He slipped into the trousers, found them to be a fine fit. He twirled the sash around his middle almost rakishly, then got into the white jacket.

He gazed critically into the mirror. "Johnny Drayton," he said, "you look like something out of a costume drama."

THERE WAS a door to the left of the alcove, and he opened it. He crossed a hallway, came to another door. Inside, he heard music. A song which had been popular years ago, something about foolish things. Ah! He sang in a monotone: "These foolish things remind me of you. A cigarette that la-de-da—"

He opened the door.

They had been thorough. There was a table, set out with roast fowl and all the trimmings. Nearby was a stand and on it an ice-bucket. In that, a bottle of what could have been champagne.

But it was a bedroom. The bed stood off in a far corner; soft blue lighting cast its shadow on the wall.

The girl was asleep. She lay under the covers, on her back, and only her face showed. The last man and the last woman, half a billion years in the future. Drayton checked a wild impulse to strut and pound his chest. That Jobijed was all right.

The girl—beautiful.

Her hair fell in disarray on the pillow, long, corn-silk in color, framing a pale, rose-tinted face. Long lashes, pert little nose, warm, inviting red lips. Her breasts rose and fell evenly under the thin coverlet. Drayton had to force himself to stop staring—the swell of them seemed just right.

He crossed silently to the bed, knelt at its head, smelled the fragrance of the sleeping girl's perfume. He shook her right shoulder under the coverlet.

She tossed restlessly for a moment, then her eyes blinked open. She looked at Drayton without comprehension. "Where am I?" she said. Lovely voice. "Umm-mm, that's rather a stereotyped question, isn't it? Well, I was swimming, and—I remember! I thought I was drowning. I—yes. They must have rescued me. Then, is this a hospital?"

"No," Drayton told her. His voice was thick. "Take a look."

She gazed about the room, took in the walls, the soft blue lighting, the table with its waiting meal. She cocked an ear when she heard the music. "What an odd place!"

Then she looked at Drayton. She giggled. "Is this a costume ball or something? You look so silly."

DRAYTON cleared his throat. All at once, Jobijed's idea was clear. There was a haven for humanity

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on Alpha something-or-other. Not for Jobijed and his companions, no—they were old and tired and good for nothing but contemplation. But for Drayton and this girl—and their progeny.

"My name is Johnny," Drayton told her. "Johnny Drayton."

"Hi. I'm Connie Philson. Now, what's all this about? Did you rescue me?"

"Umm-mm, no," said Drayton. He'd better tell her what Jobijed had told him, so that they could go right ahead with their plans. First he'd destroy the enemy, then there was the girl—and the future of the human race.

"You were," Drayton began, "uh, rescued in a very strange way."

"Whatever do you mean? You sound so mysterious." Connie sat up, but the coverlet did not come up with her. She wore nothing but her feminine loveliness, and Drayton had been right. The swell of her....

"Eek! I'm not dressed! Go away, come on, go away—"

Hastily, she pulled the coverlet up to her neck, waiting for Drayton to leave.

"They should have left some clothing around for you—ah!" He found a pile of it at the foot of the bed, tossed it to her. "I'll turn my back. Go on, now, get dressed. We have a lot to talk about."

He heard rustling noises after he turned around, but after a while Connie was giggling again. "You forgot something, Mr. Drayton." The giggle disappeared, and her voice was less than cool.

"What?"

"Know what you gave me? A pair of slacks and a hat! The hat I don't need, thank you. But have you got—"

Drayton mumbled under his breath, took off his white dinner jacket. He tossed it over one shoulder and waited. Presently, Connie said: "Okay, Mr. Drayton. You can turn around. But this is the queerest setup."

Connie stood beside the bed. The slacks were a tight fit made of some sleek black substance. The white dinner jacket was much too large, and because it only buttoned once and, at that, someplace down near Connie's waist, a lot of white skin showed.

"I—I guess it will do till I can get out of here," Connie told him, smoothing the jacket down hard over her chest. "But I still feel half naked. Now, what on earth happened?" Then she laughed again. "You should see yourself, sitting there in a pair of pants and a sash!"

SHE ALTERNATED between bewildered anger and laughter, and Drayton wondered if he could straighten everything out by telling her what had happened. He cleared his throat again. "Well, you remember you thought you were drowning? Well, you did."

"I did what?"

"You ... drowned."

"Now you're joking. If I drowned, then I'm dead. Here, come here and feel me. Never mind!"

Drayton spoke very quickly, all in a wild rush of words. He almost felt stupid, telling her the truth, and he realized he was doing a very poor job of it. "You died, see? Only you didn't, because just at the last moment, Jobijed and his friends came and snatched your soul away, taking it here, five hundred millions of years in the future. I was in an auto wreck, and they took my soul, too. They built our bodies all over again and put our souls inside, and here we are. See?"

"Sure, I see. You're crazy!"

"No, wait a minute. If you listen, I can prove it. Look: if this were the twentieth century, would I go around dressed like this?"

"Of course—if you were crazy. Any other proof?"

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"Sure. Just wait till you see Jobijed and his friends, and this whole place—"

"Well, try your little game on some other girl, Mr. Drayton. Because I can't stay to see anything. As it happens, I have a date tonight, and—hey, what time is it?"

"How should I know? Five hundred million years in the future, though, so I guess it doesn't much matter. Are you hungry?"

"Now, listen, Mr. Drayton—"

"Call me Johnny."

"I'd like to call you a lot of things, Mr. Drayton. I don't want any part of it, thank you. I just want to go home. So, if you'll show me the way out?"

SHE WALKED past him, haughtily, but then her nostrils caught the aroma of the savory fowl, kept somehow warm on the table. "Umm-mm, now that you mention it, I am hungry. Well, if I eat with you, will you promise to let me use a telephone afterwards?"

"I can't. No telephone. And no one to talk to. Just the last three men, inside somewhere, and they don't talk, not really. Three old guys, all wrinkled up, with big heads. And us. And their enemies."

"Aha!" Connie cried. She lifted her arms to the ceiling dramatically. "And they brought you here to save them from their enemies. And I'm here to help you—my great big hero."

Drayton nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, now you're getting it. That's exactly what they said."

"Brother, are you batty! Never mind that dinner. If you don't let me out of here, right now, I'm going to scream. I'm going to scream so loud that all the police on Long Island will come running."

Drayton shrugged wearily. Maybe it would be a good idea to have Jobijed explain things to her, after all. "You go through that door," he told her, pointing the way toward Jobijed's quarters.

Connie sniffed and walked past him. She opened the door and strode out through the hallway. She was back in a few minutes, and she looked very frightened. "There were three old men, like you said," she whispered. "With big heads. And they talked to me, but not out loud. I don't know. They asked—"

"What did they ask?"

Her face reddened. "If we had retired yet. That was the word, retired. They expected us to retire, together."

"Well, now do you believe me?" Drayton moved toward her. Connie looked badly shaken, and he put his arm on her shoulder protectively.

"Take your hands off me! No, I don't believe a word of it. I'll never believe anything you tell me. This is a trick, that's what it is. This is the far future, huh? And we're the last real man and real woman. So they want us to . . . get married, sort of."

"Sort of."

"Bosh! It's just an elaborate scheme, like showing etchings, only worse. If you're not crazy, Mr. Drayton, you're a rotten stinker."

DRAYTON shrugged hopelessly. He wondered idly if Adam had had the same trouble with Eve. Perhaps Jobijed in his eagerness had been a little on the precipitous side, but then Jobijed couldn't be held responsible. He just didn't know twentieth-century conventions.

"You'd better go to sleep," Drayton told the girl. "I'll see you in the morning."

"As a matter of fact, I am tired. If you won't let me out of here, then I will go to sleep. But I'll lock the door

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from the inside."

Drayton smiled blandly. "There's no lock," he said. This could almost be amusing, if it weren't so important.

Connie pushed him ahead of her through the door. Then she stood on the threshold, staring at him. "You look like a normal man," she said. "You'd almost be cute if you could get that leer off your face."

"It's not a leer. I'm trying to smile at you so you won't be afraid."

"Well, just let me go to sleep. And here—take your jacket, I don't want it." She unbuttoned the white dinner jacket, began to shrug it off her pretty shoulders. But halfway through the operation, she realized that she wore exactly nothing beneath it. She buttoned it quickly and slammed the door shut.

Drayton turned on his heel and began to walk away, but he heard the door opening. Connie's arm extended through the crack, and she dropped Drayton's jacket on the floor outside her room. "Here," she said. "I hope I never have to see you again. And can you please turn off that music?"

Evidently, Jobijed and his companions had only that one song, "These Foolish Things", because it had been playing over and over again.

"I don't know how," Drayton said, picking up his jacket. "They probably play it in our minds somehow. Well, good night."

He heard a muted "oh" as the door slammed again.

DRAYTON saw very little of Connie in the next few weeks. Occasionally, he'd meet her in the hallways, and she'd mutter something, although in a timid voice, about its still being a big hoax. But she didn't seem so sure of herself.

For his own part, Drayton watched time whirl by in a frenzy of activity. He could not hope to understand the science behind Jobijed's weapons, but he needed some slight working knowledge of them. Day after day he studied and tinkered under Jobijed's watchful tutelage.

One morning—after Drayton had awakened from the equivalent of a full night's sleep and had his breakfast—Jobijed informed him they were ready. The armada had been assembled on the surface. Rank after rank of robot planes were waiting there for him, and he knew what to expect. Flight to the twilight zone would be automatic, and he'd take over the whole armada later on from his controls in the lead ship, after actual contact had been made. He felt elated. Here were three helpless remnants of his race, looking to him for succor. Well, Drayton would help them. It was the least he could do for earth's final human beings.

As for Connie—well, there would be time enough, Drayton thought, to worry about her later. Of all the mule-headed—

A conical lift took Drayton up through the shaft to the gleaming mound. He stepped out onto the bleak red tableland, felt the wind this time as it tore through his thin dinner jacket, looked up for a moment at the monstrous crimson sun.

In a great circle all around the mound, Drayton's armada was sprawled, row after row of wingless, jetless ships, half a thousand teardrop weapon bearers, the power to destroy a civilization, or a world, at Drayton's fingertips.

He entered the lead plane through a port in its gleaming saffron belly. Jobijed's face appeared on a screen. "Ready, Drayton?"

"Ready." His mouth felt very dry; his tongue was stuck to its roof. He was ready, yes, as ready as he would ever be. But he trembled, and not with eagerness alone.

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With the roar of a thousand thunderstorms, the fleet took off. It climbed only a few hundred feet. Drayton need fear no natural barriers on a flat earth. The fleet hovered briefly, then soared away so rapidly that the ground was less than a blur of red and ochre to Drayton's eyes.

"Hello."

DRAYTON whirled around. Connie squirmed out from behind one of the control panels. "When I saw all these planes assembled, I thought maybe you were taking them home. So I came along. I hope you don't mind."

She had taken a piece of the flimsy coverlet from her bed and made a halter out of it. Drayton liked it a lot better than the jacket he had given her. But he was angry. He'd have a lot of work to do once they reached the twilight valleys, and Connie might get in his way.

"Sure I mind," he told her. "Damn it, you could gum up everything—"

She pouted. "Well, then take me back. Go ahead, take me back. Leave me with those three queer old men forever."

Here we go again, Drayton thought. "I can't take you back," he said. "These ships are on automatic for the time being. But just keep out of the way. And now do you believe?"

"I—I don't know what to believe. This is all so strange, so impossible. And yet—Johnny, I'll believe, for the time being, just like the ship's on automatic. But then will you take me home?"

All he said was, "Look down." Slowly, the sun seemed to sink toward the horizon behind the vast swarm of craft. "We're approaching the twilight zone of an earth which is so old that it no longer rotates on its axis," Drayton explained.

Shadows grew longer. The sky became dark, a shadow world of flickering scarlet. Now the land became more irregular, and the ships soared up over a low range of mountains.

Below, Drayton saw the twilight valleys! There in the scarlet half-light, a suggestion of green. Parched dead on one side, frozen corpse on the other, earth was girdled by a middle-land of life!

To get the feel of things, Drayton tried his weapons out in a harmless experiment first. He took the ship off automatic, sent it screaming down toward the crest of a small hill. The other craft dipped and followed, sentient beings intent upon their master.

Scorch and boil and broil of heat beams—and the hill was left behind, a charred and lifeless mound. Drayton was breathless. "Ever see anything like it?"

"No. I haven't. But what are you going to do?"

"Watch."

The fleet soared on over the first of the three twilight valleys. The pucker of Jobijed's mouth on the viewing screen became a slit. "Careful, Drayton. Don't get too close—"

Connie seemed alarmed. "Are there people down there?"

"People? No, I don't think so. Creatures—enemies. We're going to destroy them."

"What? Just on the word of those three old men you'll bring death down into these valleys? So much killing, just on their word? Johnny, are you sure?"

IT WAS a good point. What, actually, did Drayton know about the valleys and their inhabitants? Surely it wouldn't hurt to sweep low once and take a look. But Jobijed must have sensed his thoughts, half way around the world. "Don't, Drayton. Danger lurks."

Drayton muttered, "All right, Con-

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nie. Just a quick look." He swooped lower, the whole fleet on his tail. Up to meet them came a swarm of tiny planes—winged craft with gyro-blades. What sort of beings were these usurpers?

Drayton stared, fascinated. He swooped lower, half aware of Connie looking breathlessly over his shoulder.

The explosive cartridges of the attacking planes popped in the air around them, rocking and bouncing their ship with concussion. One of the robot craft hurtled away, disabled, to fiery destruction against the low mountains that formed a cup around the valley.

Drayton pressed his braking lever. A hundred feet over the valley his fleet hovered.

"Destroy the valley!" Jobijed's thoughts hissed.

"Keep your shirt on!" Drayton cried, impatiently.

Not a figure stirred in the valley. Drayton saw vegetation, trees and shrubbery and meadowland, all in a careful park-like landscape. But no movement. Fearful, the inhabitants lurked indoors.

Then Drayton saw the town.

Houses of stone, row on row of them, in delicate pastel colors here in the half-light. Graceful houses of gingerbread, thought Drayton: a fairyland for folk of gentle nature; a quiet hamlet of beauty.

Men! Those houses could have been built only by men!

"Use your heat-beams, Drayton!"

Below him the elfin city. No bigger than seashore bungalows were the houses, standing in regimented rows along little streets of tile. Houses for men. Men like Drayton; women like Connie—not for the big-headed trio of the caverns. Was this why Jobijed had not wanted him to go down? The usurpers were men, not hideous travesties. He couldn't kill them, not after he had seen their work. It crossed his mind that he and Connie could live with them, an almost normal life, here half a billion years in the future.

Jobijed's thoughts again: "You're making a serious mistake, Drayton."

Drayton laughed. He looked at Connie, a question in his eyes, and she nodded. He picked up a heavy instrument and swung one swift blow at the view-screen, watched it shatter, saw its pieces tinkle to the floor.

DRAYTON put all the other ships back on automatic, sent them winging away from the twilight land and toward earth's sun-side. Let Jobijed have his toys. He, Drayton, did not want them. Slowly, he brought their own ship down into the valley, into a plaza at the center of the quiet town.

He took Connie's hand. "Do you believe, now?"

"I don't know what to believe. I only know that I'm afraid, terribly afraid, because I think I'll never get back home. And, I think I could hate you. Yes, hate you, because you took me here, wherever we are."

"I told you I had nothing to do with your coming. But you'd be dead now if you weren't here. Isn't this better than death?"

She withdrew her hand. "No, don't touch me. I still don't know. I just don't know. Maybe outside, in this city, is the answer . . . ."

Drayton swore softly. She was still obstinate, would not let herself believe. And one part at least of Jobijed's tale still remained: Drayton longed to take Connie, unresisting, into his arms. But if she persisted—well, there was a city outside, and people. Women who perhaps doubted less and acted more . . . .

They walked outside into the cool air of the plaza. The sweet scent of

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life came to them on a gentle breeze of crisp air. The scent of autumn in New England, here in this eternal autumn.

Drayton was eager. In half a billion years, another group of primates certainly could evolve into human beings. Then did Jobijed and his companions hate them because they were a young race with all the unborn tomorrows ahead of them? Destruction, then, for the people of the valleys. That's what Jobijed wanted—simply out of spite.

The men and women came out of their houses slowly, cautiously, by twos and threes. Timidly, they clustered around the ship, several hundred people. Human.

Not quite, Drayton thought. A certain elfin quality about them, like the houses. Graceful, every one of them, but with an almost unearthly grace. Soft white of skin, like purest alabaster.

—

DRAYTON walked toward them, aware that Connie hung back near the hull of the ship. A woman came to meet him, proud-faced, almost haughty. Ivory-skinned and raven-tressed, she wore a simple tunic of palest blue. "You would have destroyed us," she said.

Drayton's pulses leaped. How did she speak his language? He asked that now, politely, almost timidly.

"That's simple enough. I don't, not really. In that sense, we have the same powers as the wicked cavern spawn, Johnny. Don't be startled. See? I even know your name, know why you are here. In half a billion years the powers of mind have increased tremendously. Is it so unnatural? Your ancestors, half a billion years before you, were less than dinosaurs. So we have our powers. We can read minds half way across the world."

Said Drayton, "I don't want to be rude, but one question I must ask."

She smiled. "Go right ahead. You're among friends."

"That's what I have in mind. Can we live here among you?"

The girl was still smiling. "But of course. We'd have it no other way." Then she frowned. "You're not . . . as you say . . . married?"

"No. She doesn't even like me."

The girl seemed relieved. "Good. Because others there are—" She blushed, averted her head. "Don't forget, it's not as if I've just met you. For long I dwelled on your thoughts, on your looks. Halfway around the world, by mental projection, by . . . Never mind! I'm being too forward."

Now Drayton smiled. "Not at all. I'm tired of women who doubt, who fight all the way what is the most natural—"

He stopped, aware abruptly that Connie was calling him. Muttering to himself, he returned to the side of the ship. "Well, what is it?"

"Johnny," she whispered, "would you think I was very silly if I asked you to leave? Let's get away from here."

"Get away? It was your idea coming down in the first place!"

"I know, I know. But call it woman's intuition if you like. I don't like this place. There's something evil here, I can sense it. Maybe your three old men were right after all. No, don't ask me how I know. I just do, that's all. Johnny. let's get away!" She grasped his hand impulsively.

"Don't be ridiculous. Look around you. Go ahead, look. These are people, real people. Just like us. And we can live here. Of all the fantastic turnabouts . . . ."

He stalked away, angry, back to the woman who waited for him on the fringe of the crowd.

They supped in a great banquet hall in the town's largest building. Connie

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kept to herself at one end of the long table, but Drayton ate and drank his fill with the people of the twilight valley. At times he glanced at Connie a little sadly, but mostly he had eyes only for the raven-tressed woman, Luroc.

HALFWAY through the meal, a bell clanged loudly outside. Luroc seemed alarmed. With half a dozen of the young men and a trio of other women, she stood up from the table.

Drayton joined her. "What is it?"

"Air-raid," she frowned. "Your friend Jobijed is attacking—or rather, he's sending his robot-planes."

"He wouldn't. Not when we're here."

"Oh he wouldn't, eh? Come on outside."

They ran together, with the others, down the tile streets. Soon they left the rows of houses behind, set out at a trot across farmland. "Airfield," Luroc called over her shoulder, running on long, graceful legs. "We're going up to stop those robot-planes. Want to come along?"

Drayton said that he did. Soon the great swarm of robot-craft came into view, but already many of the gyro-planes had taken to the air to meet them. The gyros were small, tiny metal fleas among the leviathans attacking, but the robot-armada did not fare too well without Drayton's sentience to guide it.

In and out darted the gyros, harrassing all the way. Drayton watched the robots maneuvering clumsily, unsure of themselves; he saw several go plunging off, flaming wrecks, to the waiting mountains.

He clambered up the wing of one of the gyros with Luroc, squeezed in beside her in the cramped cockpit, felt the warmth of her hip against his own. Then they were taking off, the wind whipping all about them, streaming Luroc's long black hair behind her.

The voice came to Drayton's mind when they joined the attacking swarm of gyros high above the airfield. "Drayton, come back to us! Take your own bomber up and return to your fleet. We don't want to destroy the valley, not now, with you down there. You are our only hope. But if you refuse, we'll have no choice!"

Drayton shook his fist at the sky. "Don't make me laugh!" he shouted. "I've had enough of that hogwash."

Luroc gripped his arm. "You tell that Jobijed, Johnny. Tell him good." Her fingers dug in almost cruelly, and then, briefly, she turned and kissed him on the lips.

Then they joined the battle. Luroc's hands flew gracefully over the controls, and their gyro responded magnificently. They climbed rapidly, high above the robot fleet, and then they plummetted down in a long hard dive that drove the breath from Drayton's lungs.

Straight for one of the robot craft they plunged, and Drayton heard the staccato burst of their guns, heard the clatter of explosive charges against the bigger ship's hull. The robot loomed before them, a giant teardrop, larger and larger. Luroc would stop, he thought. She had to stop, or they'd be destroyed in a head-on crash with that saffron hull.

But she did not stop. A grim smile played about her lips as they increased their speed. The robot swelled before them.

Abruptly, it swung down and away, a gutted hulk. It shuddered, danced crazily, spun once and then again. It plunged out of sight beyond the cup of mountains which surrounded the valley.

"One!" Luroc cried.

After that, everything became an unreal fantasy. They climbed high once

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more, chose their target, roared down upon it....

Up again. Then down, and fire.

Up—

One by one the robots dropped away, damaged or destroyed utterly. As yet, not a single bomb had been dropped, not a heat-ray had broiled down upon the valley.

Jobijed's voice once more: "We're leaving, Drayton. This is madness, ridiculous. We don't want to destroy you. Perhaps some day you'll learn. Then, if it is not too late..."

"Hah!" Luroc shouted her laughter to the skies. "They are afraid—afraid! We've beaten them, Johnny, for now."

THEY TOOK up the interrupted meal as though nothing had happened. Connie called Drayton down to her end of the table. "Well, smart guy, does that convince you?"

"What? Does what convince me?"

"The way the robots fled. Does that convince you I could be right?"

"Why should it?" Drayton chafed at this delay, wanted to return to Luroc.

"They certainly could have bombed the town, Johnny. But they didn't, because we are here. Everything they told you was the truth."

"That's very funny," Drayton said. "First, I couldn't get you to believe a thing. Now, when it turns out to be a vicious lie, you do believe it. Can't you see that we belong here with the people of the valley?"

"No. I see nothing of the sort. Oh—you're impossible!" Connie got up, stalked down the length of the table to Luroc, bent and talked with her for a moment, distaste on her face. But Luroc seemed unperturbed as Drayton joined them.

"...of course, Connie," she was saying. "You're tired. Very well, you go through there. Yes, there. Second door on your left, a bedroom. It's yours for as long as you want it. Good night."

"Good night," Connie said stiffly. She didn't look at Drayton. Her back was very straight as she walked away.

Luroc called for more wine, then said: "A strange girl, that one. What troubles her, Johnny?"

"Forget it. It isn't important." Damn Connie! She could sow the seeds of suspicion at that. He wondered briefly why Jobijed's fleet came, then departed suddenly, without unleashing a single lethal ray. Was it as Connie had said—because they were in the valley? Had the fleet come, after all, just to get them to return?

Luroc smiled. "I'm reading your thoughts, you know."

Drayton stood up, splashing wine on the tablecloth. "Hey! That can be very disconcerting—"

"Well, I promise not to, after we know we can trust you. As for those thoughts, Johnny, forget them. Jobijed's fleet fled because we beat them. It's happened before and it will happen again. But you have nothing to do with it. You believe me, don't you, Johnny?"

GREEN AND amber and beautiful, her eyes looked into his. "I'll believe you," he said.

"Good!" Abruptly, she was all laughter again. "Would you like to take a walk and see our city?"

Johnny nodded, and they excused themselves from the table. They walked outside, not talking. Luroc led him down a street across a small plaza to a little park. It was deserted.

"I thought you might like to come here and talk."

Hadn't she said something about seeing the city? Well, what was the difference? It was a balmy autumn night, and a man and woman belonged

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together in a quiet park, alone.

They sat down on a bench hewn out of stone, set back deep in the shadow of a grove of fruit trees. A stream gurgled nearby. Birds chattered. It could almost have been half a billion years ago.

"Johnny," Luroc turned to him, her face only inches away, "we want you to do a complete about-face. Did you know that?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, Jobijed wanted you to destroy us. And we want you to destroy Jobijed and his cavern." She said it quietly, patiently, almost as if she were talking to a child.

"I'll be double-damned. Turnabout and start the whole thing over again, huh? Why? Why don't your people forget all about Jobijed and his cavern?"

"We can't. For one thing, there are the air raids. They destroy, they kill. For another, there's space travel. Jobijed has conquered that, Johnny. Although, as you know, he can't use it."

"As a matter of fact, he wants me to use it. With Connie."

Luroc chuckled. "Well, that's something of the past. Anyway, I think you know Earth is a dying planet. Two hundred years, three hundred, and the future generations of my people must perish from lack of water. We have our reservoirs, but each year it rains less. One day we will thirst and thirst and there will not be one drop of water left.

"We depend upon those reservoirs. If they were destroyed— But that's beside the point. Point is, sooner or later there will be no water anyway. And Jobijed has space travel, Johnny. Giving us the secret, he could let my people go off to the stars to find a new home. But he's wicked and spiteful and the answer is no—and so we war."

"What can I do?"

"Kill Jobijed, kill his companions. Get their spaceship and bring it here so we can duplicate it."

"Sure, I guess I can try. But why don't you do that yourselves?"

"DON'T YOU think we would if we could? The caverns are a fortress. We can't get in, not with our little gyros and our explosives. But you can, Johnny. You can pretend you've changed your mind, return there. You'd be received as a friend. Then..." She shrugged. "The rest is up to you."

"He'd read my mind, just as you can. How could I fool him?"

"Leave that to us. We have our own unique powers. We can cloud your mind—"

Drayton stood up. "Let me think about it," he said. A moment ago he said he would do it, but now he wondered. Hell, could he just turn on Jobijed like that? He felt suddenly like a helpless pawn in a game between two forces that didn't even bother to explain all the rules to him. Luroc was right, of course. But still, what had Connie said? "Better let me think," he told Luroc now.

She pulled him down on the bench, gently. "All right, but not now. I'm a woman, Johnny. And you're a man, and I—I watched you for a long time in the caverns, projecting mentally. I like what I saw...."

God! thought Drayton. What a woman! Frank, yes, and almost brazen, if you looked at it that way. But didn't he somehow feel the same bond? It swept over him now, softly at first, but with growing insistence. He could do his work, destroy the cavern, get the spaceship—then have a life with Luroc and her people among the stars. Luroc...

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He took her in his arms fiercely. Mary? Who was Mary, dead half a billion years? And Connie—frightened, doubting Connie—was a pale, doubting flower beside Luroc. But it was a mad, impossible situation. Three women, one less than dust, the other longing for a world she could never have again. The third—

Luroc returned his kisses passionately.

They stayed a long time in the quiet grove of trees....

AND THE next day, Luroc showed Drayton her city. He could not help comparing it with the too-antiseptic, coldly scientific caverns of Jobijed. Luroc and her people dwelt in one small oasis on an Earth turned ugly with age—and seeing their twilight valley, you forgot the ugly Earth!

Everything in pastel hues, a quiet hamlet nestled in the twilight valley. Luroc's people worked hard to keep their valley beautiful, but when work was finished, they played. They danced and sang in their village square, and at first Drayton felt like an intruder. But their wine was heady stuff, and soon a smiling, laughing Luroc dragged him out into the square and danced for him. Wild and primitive she was. Yet graceful. So graceful that all her brothers and sisters of the twilight land stopped their playing to watch.

Before he knew it, friendly hands had shoved Drayton forward, and he danced with Luroc, the strong amber wine putting wings to his feet. The reed instruments and drums roared in his ears and from far away he heard the crowd shouting its approval. When the dance was concluded, he felt very much a part of the twilight valley. And the dance had given spurs to his passion for the slim, strong Luroc....

Laughing, the crowd surged forward, carrying him back to the banquet hall, where there was more feasting. There was a small wild pig on a giant skewer, crisply brown and succulent, a golden apple in its mouth. And more wine, flagon after flagon of it, cool and dry.

Thoughts of Connie crossed his mind, but only for a moment. She had been slow on the uptake in Jobijed's cavern, and she'd be equally slow now. That was all there was to it. Perhaps she wouldn't be swept into it as rapidly as he had, but she'd find her place in the wonderful life of the twilight valley.

All about Drayton now, the noble faces of the twilight people clustered. Soft-stirring, on the edge of laughter almost, their voices yet were insistent.

"Join us against the spawn of the caverns, Drayton."

"We're human—you're human. Help us!"

Human—yes! Luroc on the arm of his chair, leaning easily toward him, smiling, her lips parted, a fine dew of perspiration on her forehead, her body still heaving softly from the exertions of the dance.

"The fates brought you here, Drayton. Don't make a mockery of the fates."

"Help us!"

"All we want to do is tend our fields and play a little, and go to live where there is more of life. But Jobijed won't let us."

Then Luroc, sliding off the arm of his chair and nestling on his lap. "Don't mind them, Johnny. They're eager, and you can't blame them. But you do like it here, don't you? You would like to live with us—"

"I like it fine. Sure—sure I want to live with you. But are you putting it that way? I mean, if I say no, what do I do, scram?"

"Johnny, Johnny!" Her laughter bubbled against his shoulder. "Of course not! You live in the twilight valley either way. You're one of us

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now. The dance was a ritual, and—"

"Well, I'd like to go outside for a walk and clear my head. This wine—"

"Sure!" Luroc cried, skipping to her feet lithely. Clinging to his arm, she led Drayton from the hall.

"WHAT WOULD you like to see?"

"Anything, I don't care. Got any suggestions?"

"Well, you haven't been to our reservoir yet. It lies high up in the hills, clear and beautiful."

They took one of the tiny planes and circled the city once before they set out toward the low mountains. In ten minutes they reached the reservoir, a crystal lake perched like a glistening coin beneath them in a mountain valley.

"Want to land?" Luroc shouted over the engine's roar, and when Drayton nodded, she brought the plane down in a long, gliding arc and landed it expertly on a small runway. Everything she did was graceful, Drayton thought. And the same applied to all her people, a handsome race, graceful, artistic. Of course he'd say yes! He'd tell them after he returned with Luroc to the banquet hall. It was the least he could do, and maybe then he'd be worthy of their fellowship.

Hand in hand they walked around the reservoir, coming finally to where three streams ran out from it, each in a different direction. Drayton was surprised to see a lot of activity, gangs of bare-chested laborers working, machines humming shrilly, foremen barking orders.

"What's all that for?" he demanded. "It looks to me like all the water has to do is flow down into your valley."

"Naturally. But there are three twilight valleys, remember? We control the reservoir, and those two streams on the left run out over the mountains to the other valleys. But they won't, not much longer."

"Oh, then there's trouble? And your men are trying to repair it?"

"You're joking."

"What do you mean, I'm joking?"

"Well, have your little game. We needed those other valleys, of course. Together, the three cities could offer stronger resistance to Jobijed. But now that you're here, why, we don't need the other valleys any more. So we're damming up the water supply and cutting them off from it."

"What?"

"I don't understand you, Johnny. What's strange about that? They'd do precisely the same thing to us were the situation reversed. People are like that, that's all. It's human nature."

And when Drayton didn't answer: "It's that way in your own time too, isn't it? But naturally—how could it be any other way?" Luroc seemed genuinely puzzled. "When you need something, you use it. But when you don't, you get rid of it. We just don't need the people of the other two valleys now...." She smiled up at him.

DRAYTON found himself wishing for a cigarette and a cup of strong black coffee, for the wine still throbbed in his veins. Human nature, she'd said. But did human beings act like that—dog eat dog? Some did, to a certain extent, but they'd carry it only so far. Only the warped totalitarian leaders would consider mass human extermination merely because the men and women in question no longer served a useful function. That was the way it had been in Drayton's day, incredibly long ago. But now?

Now Luroc spoke of mass murder as though it were a commonplace. *We just don't need the people of the other valleys now....* You don't need them,

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so you kill them, just like that. You take their water away and let them die of thirst in a land where it rarely rains....

Drayton looked at Luroc's loveliness, and sighed. Animals which had hit upon human form in half a billion years along the dim corridors of time. Human outwardly, but what resided within their hearts was predatory animal instinct.

He'd rejected Jobijed for his physical ugliness. Was he now going to accept the twilight people for their surface beauty, for the beauty which resided in Luroc's face and body? He knew Luroc would never understand. Human beings acted that way in her experience, but Drayton couldn't gear his own emotions to a brutal indifference toward life. He'd almost been the chump to end all chumps. They needed him now, but what would happen after he'd done their dirty work for them? Was it all a game, was Luroc's passion part of that game too? He didn't know and, quite suddenly, he didn't care. They looked human, too human, perhaps. But it was a mockery. Jobijed had known, Jobijed with half a billion years of culture behind him, and Drayton had been a fool. Now he wanted out.

They took their plane back to the twilight city, and if Luroc noticed Drayton's silent uneasiness, she did not mention it. He grunted his own part of the conversation, hardly hearing the words he spoke. If they could do that to their own people in the other valleys, what might they plan for Connie, whose intuition told her not to like them? Drayton had sobered completely when they landed.

SILENTLY, they entered the building of the banquet hall. Darkness never came to this twilight land; the dead sun loomed forever just beyond the horizon. But it was night for the people of the valley.

On bare feet, they padded softly through the silent halls. The suggestion of a sound came to Drayton, abruptly, from far off.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. It wasn't anything. Come, I'll show you to your sleeping quarters. In the morning we can plan what you must do."

"Wait." Drayton had heard it again, a faint whimpering.

"I said it was nothing." Luroc turned, cupped his chin in her hand, kissed him. "Don't let every little noise distract you, Johnny."

He shrugged. Perhaps someone was having nightmares. But it came again, and this time it ended in a scream.

Connie's voice!

Luroc tried to hold him, but he pulled away and ran down the dark hallway. What was it Luroc had told Connie? Through there, second door on your left....

He heard Luroc calling him, demanding that he stop. But he darted onward through the corridors, frowning. Had Luroc drawn him away to the reservoir to keep him occupied while something else, something more important, was happening?

He reached the door, pounded on it. Within, Connie screamed his name—then silence.

He tried the door. Locked. "Connie?"

No answer.

He stepped back, hurtled against the door with his shoulder. The impact jarred him all the way down to his toes, but he felt the door quiver in its frame. He struck it again, heard wood splintering. The third time he crashed all the way through. The momentum made him stumble, and he sprawled full length on Connie's bed.

It was dark. A blind was drawn over

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the window against the perpetual twilight. Drayton rolled over, started to get up.

A form lunged at him, crashed against his midsection, bore him to the floor. He lay there, grappling. Whoever he was, his opponent was big and powerful, using arms and legs to pinion Drayton before his eyes could acclimate to the half-darkness.

Drayton thrashed about, kicked up and over with his legs. His attacker grunted and lost his hold for a moment but, as he rolled clear, Drayton felt something sharp bite its way into the muscle just below his right shoulder.

HE LASHED out with his left hand, felt cartilege crunch under his knuckles. He struck again, crouching on his knees, short hammering blows with the weight of his body behind them. The man under him moaned, and Drayton felt fingers pawing at his face, seeking his eyes.

He turned his head away as he continued hammering with his left fist. Hammering—

Suddenly, the room was filled with light. A dark man lay supine under him. Off a few feet on the carpet, a knife glittered dully.

Connie helped him to his feet. "He hurt you! You're bleeding, Johnny."

Blood darkened the right sleeve of his jacket. He felt weak and a little giddy, and he didn't resist when Connie led him to the bed and stripped off his jacket. "The bleeding's stopped, I think," she said, crossing the room to a foyer. She disappeared for a moment, returned with a towel dripping wet, applied it to Drayton's shoulder.

"Umm-mm, that feels good. What in hell's been happening, Connie?"

"I—I'm not sure. I was asleep. I thought I heard the door opening. Then this man came in, locking the door behind him. He came for me with that knife. We struggled. Then you came. Johnny, you saved my life."

He grinned. "I guess I've been a prize boob, kid. I still don't know what's going on, but I think that's just the way they wanted it. Now—"

"Now what, Johnny? What can we do?"

"I think we're going to have to get the devil out of here, and fast."

LUROC STOOD in the battered doorway, panting. Her face was flushed; her breasts rose and fell rapidly under the blue tunic. "I ran after you as fast as I could, Johnny. What happened?"

"Don't tell me you don't know?"

"How should I know? Wait—don't tell me you think I—"

"That's exactly what I think. You took me away, kept me distracted, so your man here could kill Connie."

"Johnny! Why should I do that? No, I guess this fellow didn't want you and the girl here, for one reason or another. He crept to Connie's room tonight intending to kill her. We saved her life, you and I."

The man on the floor groaned. Drayton waited until his eyes flickered open, then he retrieved the knife. He crouched near the man, holding the blade at his throat. "All right, chum," he said. "I have some questions to ask you."

Alarm crossed Luroc's face briefly, then was gone. "He won't be able to answer a thing you ask," she predicted. But Drayton sensed it wasn't so much a prediction as it was a command to the man on the floor.

Drayton prodded the man's Adam's apple with his knife. "Why'd you come here?"

The man looked at Luroc, squirmed. Drayton's blade bit deeper. "I came to kill her." He looked at Connie,

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trembling now.

Drayton shrugged. "We know that. But why?"

No answer. Luroc was laughing softly. "Really, Johnny, I'm surprised. There's no intrigue here, as I told you. I'll personally see to it that this man is executed if you like—but I had nothing to do with it. We're your friends. We want you to stay."

"Nuts!" Drayton felt very weary. He had kissed this woman, had made love to her....

"Now, for the last time, why did you come?" He turned the knife a little, watched a slow trickle of blood creep down the man's neck.

The man sobbed. "Luroc. It was Luroc! She didn't think you would listen, not with this girl whispering in your ear all the time. So—"

Luroc turned and ran for the doorway, the smile gone from her lips. But Connie stuck out her foot, almost daintily, it seemed to Drayton, and Luroc tumbled forward. Her head struck an edge of the battered door, and she lay very still.

DRAYTON ran to her, bent over her —and something hit him from behind, bowling him over. He lay heavily across her outstretched body, glanced up in time to see the dark man running past, disappearing down the hallway.

"Damn it!" Drayton swore, getting up. "He'll call for help. Well, it serves me right, I guess. I had to come gawking here to see if Luroc—"

"Is she badly hurt, Johnny?" Connie's face was pale.

"No. I don't think so. She's breathing regularly enough. Just knocked out cold, kid. Hell, don't worry about it. Luroc had it coming to her. Of all the lousy tricks."

"I still don't get it. Not quite."

"Well, put it this way: I'm the number-one fool this side of eternity. You were right all along, there's something evil here. They knew that you could sense it, realized they'd have to kill you before they could expect any cooperation from me. So—hey! If we stand here talking, we'll never get away. Come on!"

Pulling Connie along behind him, he plunged out through the doorway. Far away, they could hear the noise of gathering pursuit. Voices shouting, feet slapping against tile.

They ducked down a corridor, pulled up short when a group of men approached from the other end. "This way," Drayton cried, and they turned down another passage. Almost, he thought they were trapped. There were soldiers here too. Waiting for them.

On their left, Drayton found a stairway going up. Half-carrying Connie with his good left arm, he mounted the stairs two at a time.

They passed through a little trap-door and found themselves on a broad, flat roof. Drayton threw home a bolt, and momentarily at least the trap-door would keep their pursuers at bay.

No railing circled the roof's edge, and the drop was a dozen feet, straight down. Drayton smiled, said: "You feel like you have wings, Connie?"

"Why?"

"Because that's the way we're going down. We're jumping. See—see out there in the plaza? Our ship. If we don't get to it in a matter of minutes, the alarm will spread. Then we'll never get to it at all."

"But I can't jump so far!"

Fists pounded on the underside of the trap-door, and soon something heavier smote the frail wood.

"Relax when you let go, Connie. Don't be stiff. Then bend your knees to take in the shock. Roll over if you have to." While he spoke Drayton prodded her toward the edge of the roof, and she stood there shaking with

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an uncontrollable fear.

"For God's sake, jump!"

"I—I can't."

Drayton cursed softly, then pushed. Connie tottered for a moment, swung her arms out wildly to regain her balance. By that time she was over the edge and on her way down. She hit on her feet, fell to her knees, rolled over twice. She grinned up at Drayton. "It wasn't so bad, Johnny. At another time, I might even have enjoyed it."

Smiling, Drayton jumped.

CONNIE gasped when he made one continuous motion out of it. He alighted, felt his knees buckle, came upright again. Not pausing, he grabbed Connie's hand and ran.

People stared at them oddly, but as yet the alarm had not spread outside the building itself. It would, however, because, looking back, Drayton saw a score of soldiers pouring out of the big entrance.

He heard a popping sound, saw chips of rock fly off the side of a structure near them. "I was afraid of that. They have firearms, kid. Run!"

The popping repeated itself until it became a continuous rumbling noise. Stone flew all around them. Glass shattered. Drayton knew their aim would be a lot better if they closed the gap. He didn't like the thought at all.

By the time they reached the ship, a small knot of people had gathered outside its port. Drayton realized they weren't soldiers.

"Okay, move aside," said Drayton. "Come on, let us through."

"Take it easy, friend. What's all the noise about?"

Drayton stiff-armed the face leering at him, saw the man tumble against his fellows. They all came forward in a rush, but Drayton slammed the port open, tumbled inside with Connie and pushed it shut again.

"Whew!" he breathed. "We can start this crate and get out of here."

But in his mind he heard laughter. Luroc's. "You think so, eh?" While he listened, Drayton realized that Luroc could project her thoughts as readily as Jobijed. The thoughts were ugly, evil. All at once he knew that—and any doubts about the course he had to take left him like a discarded cloak.

Said Luroc in his mind: "They brought you here, Drayton, the men of the cavern. And it may be that I can send you back . . . ."

Briefly, Drayton remembered what had happened once before. He had come within a hair of returning half a billion years—to death. What was it Jobijed had told him? *Your own time still has power over your soul. You must fight it . . . .*

A BUZZING swept in around him, filled his ears until all other sound was gone. Connie was shouting something, but he could not hear. She approached, reached out, grabbed his shoulders. He felt nothing!

Hazy became the inside of the ship. It swam in a mist. Drayton was a soul again—an *elan,* Jobijed called it—without a body. Through the mists that clouded his vision, he thought he saw his body slump, saw Connie try to hold it upright. He knew she was screaming.

The mists dissolved.

Drayton stood in a cemetery.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . ." he heard the Priest intone.

Luroc was returning him to the day of his burial.

The casket called him!

He walked to it, slowly. He ran. He pushed the lid.

It was raining, and cold. He wanted to get out of the rain, to get inside the case with its warmth—forever . . . . No, wait. He didn't want it. Luroc did.

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And somehow he knew that if his *elan* merged with the coffin—if he did that once, even if only briefly—there'd be no turning back. The corridors of time would be closed to him forever. He could never return to his new body, his new life, in the future.

His *elan* would dissolve away with the death of his body, here in the twentieth century!

On the brink, he paused. Connie's face swam into his vision, beautiful, corn-silk hair, soft smile, pleading.... He held it there, fastened upon it, anchored his thoughts on it and cried out to it with all his soul. Slowly, he stepped back and away from the casket.

"Connie! Connie—call me—"

The cemetery flickered, became unreal, dissolved in mists of white which became flecked with red, all red, mists no more.

He was back in the ship—*elan* and body again complete. He lay on the floor, his head pillowed on Connie's lap. She was sobbing. "You just fell down, like—like your body was a puppet and someone cut all the strings."

Somehow, he had won. He knew the long-dead past would call him no more. He had severed the final link of the chain that held him poised in the cycles of time. He could work out his own destiny now, here in the far future—and it would be up to him, to the strength of his arm, the cunning of his brain. Luroc or no, the past would not call again.

HE TOOK the ship up, then turned to face Connie. Below, men scurried about like tiny insects. Off to the right, a swarm of the gyro-planes came up to meet them.

But they weren't helpless; not like the robots at all. Drayton kept their ship moving, darting and wheeling in the red twilight skies. He swung the heat projectors in a wide arc, cutting a swath in the ranks of gyro-planes.

One by one, they fell, charred, smoking ruins, to the valley below. The sky was peppered with soft-popping flak, but their ship soared up, out of range.

Connie said, "What can we do now?"

"Well, they deserve destruction. But I—we can't just slaughter them. Could you picture yourself fanning the streets with heat-beams? No—there must be another way."

"Johnny, don't you see? They have to die. It's a fact. Cold and ruthless maybe, but a fact. It's either them or Jobijed and his fellows—and our chance to use Jobijed's spaceship and get off this dying planet."

Drayton sighed. But then he was laughing. "Then you believe? Now you believe everything?"

"How could I doubt any longer? Of course I believe. And also..." she blushed.

"Also what?"

"Well, Jobijed wanted us to... preserve the race. Become the ancestors of a new humanity out among the stars. Johnny..."

"What?"

"I've behaved like an idiot. I—I think I'd like that, with you...."

For a moment, he took her in his arms and kissed her. If the fire of Luroc wasn't there, something else was. Something quieter, perhaps, but stronger and more enduring.

Gently, she pushed him away. "Johnny, Johnny—I'm so happy. But what about now?"

He grinned at her. "Kill-joy. Seriously, Connie, there's something in my mind, trying to tell me something.... Of course!" He gazed outside; far far down and off to the left he caught the gleam of a body of water, ruby-red in the eternal twi-

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"Reservoir," he said. "They told me how dependent on it they were. Without it they'd perish. Or, if they didn't, they'd be so busy trying to undo the damage that they wouldn't have time to war with Jobijed."

THEY SOARED down over the reservoir. The last water on a dying earth, except for Jobijed's synthesis of hydrogen and oxygen in the caverns. Drayton saw not one conduit, but three. One led down into the valley of Luroc's people, while the other two climbed out across the mountains, giant snakes that followed the contours of the land.

"There are three valleys," Drayton told Connie. "One conduit for each. This is their entire supply of water."

They swooped down, were met by a hail of fire from the swarms of gyroplanes. The little ships darted about them recklessly, in a suicidal attempt to stop them. Concussion shook the air, made a seething turmoil of it.

Drayton ignored the planes. He spread his heat-beams out in a broad fan, swept the reservoir with them. A great billowing cloud of steam hissed up to meet them, obscuring everything.

"Those gyro-pilots won't be able to see a thing," muttered Drayton. "Just out of sheer blindness, they're liable to hit us."

He played the heat-beams down until the cloud of steam began to grow thinner. It became tenuous, finally dissipated into the air.

Below them, the reservoir was a giant steaming cup—but empty! As dry as the ash-of-rose tableland that was earth's sun-side....

"IN THE final analysis," said Jobijed, "the decision was yours to make. I know I'm not attractive And my companions—they're even worse by your standards. No—let me finish. That much I couldn't help, but the rest you had to see for yourself, Drayton, and act accordingly. It was foolish of me to try any other plan."

Drayton nodded, squeezing Connie's hand as they listened. Hours before, they had returned to the caverns in their battered ship.

"You see," Jobijed continued, "the new men of the valleys are evil. I didn't want to tell you they looked like men, Drayton. I suppose I was afraid. An age ago, one of the species of undifferentiated primates a lot like the orangutans of your day mutated. The result: the men of the valleys. But the orang of your day is an evil beast, and the trait remained in the germplasm—"

"But they looked so human," Drayton said. He remembered Luroc and their evening in the park. Well, he'd been duped. He liked the feel of Connie's hand much better.

Jobijed's frail shoulders shrugged. "I don't know, Drayton. Probably they don't look like that at all. They have ways of clouding your mind. Oh, I don't mean to say they're far removed from humanity, but probably there are little differences which you might have seen had they let you."

Drayton recalled the elfin quality he had known at first. Elfin. Alien fit it as well, but they had stopped his mind from dwelling on it.

Jobijed stood up, leaning on his cane. "We've won," he mused happily. "You know, often we felt that if we gave the twilight creatures our secret of space travel, they'd leave Earth and let us spend our few remaining years in peace. But always there was the thought of the man and woman we'd bring here someday, the man and woman who would go to the stars for humanity. You'd go, and they'd go. And because they are predatory, evil, their progeny might one day war on your children's children out in the marches

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of space. No, they had to be destroyed . . . ."

Jobijed limped from the room with his two big-headed companions, and Drayton followed with Connie, thinking of the fatherly wisdom which was Jobijed's and of the way he, Drayton, had doubted.

Jobijed reached a wall of the cavern, pressed a stud. In a moment, the wall slid back ponderously, with much grating and sliding. It revealed a shaft much wider than the entrance through the gleaming mound. Overhead, red sunlight streamed in faintly.

BUT WHAT held Drayton's attention was the great silver hull within the shaft, a magnificent needle pointing up at the rose-hued sky.

"Your space ship," Jobijed said, half reverently.

Connie placed a hand on her throat. "It's so big!"

"In it you will find all the science of our race," Jobijed told her. "And provisions for a long journey. To Alpha Centauri, remember. Drayton—Connie—all our dreams go with you. Earth is dying, but you're leaving Earth to start all over again for mankind, out there in the sky."

"Won't you three come with us?" Drayton demanded.

Jobijed shook his head. "No, we are old and tired; we'd be more of a hindrance than a help. We will spend our last remaining years here in the cavern, contemplating. Start fresh, and don't look back. It's better that way, Drayton."

Jobijed led them forward. "The ship is automatic. You get in, close the airlock, and it won't open until you reach Alpha Centauri. Many months' journey, Drayton. There will be books for you to read, should you grow bored . . . ."

Opening the polished silver airlock, Drayton smiled. He stepped within the ship with Connie, thought for a moment of another couple, so long ago through the corridors of time. Adam and Eve. Well, they would be Adam and Eve all over again.

Jobijed extended his hand. "Good luck," he said. A tear welled up in the corner of his eye, rolled down his cheek. "Man's future lies with you. Perhaps someday, who knows? Perhaps your children's children will return here to visit us."

"Goodbye," Drayton said, a lump in his throat. "I'm sorry I ever doubted you."

"Goodbye," said Connie, leaning forward impulsively, kissing Jobijed's great dome of a forehead.

Color rushed into Jobijed's pale face. "Well, farewell. And remember, it's a long journey. If you grow restless, you can read—"

Connie clung to Drayton's arm. "We won't grow restless," she assured him.

Jobijed seemed quite human at that moment. His pucker of a mouth spread into a smile as Drayton swung the airlock shut.

THE END

Continued from page **54**

"But you—"

"I am slipping again—again—again. I will cry—cry. I will be in pain but you must ignore it. When you are through, I will be waiting. Love will not be denied, Lorn. It is the strongest force."

"I will go."

"Keep my picture in your heart."

* * *

READ, man of tomorrow! Farewell . . . .

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From These Ashes

By Fredric Brown

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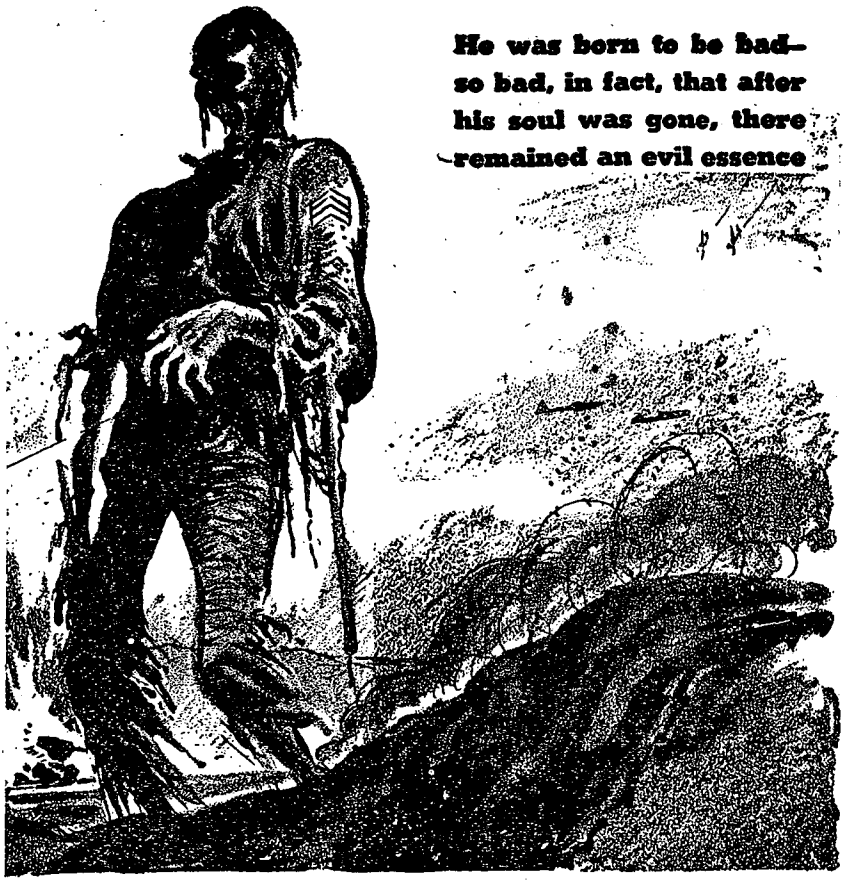

Listing from the World Biographical Dictionary, 1970 Edition: DIX, John, b. Louisville, Ky., U.S.A., Feb. 1, 1940; son Harvey R. (saloonkeeper) and Elizabeth (Bailey); student Louisville Public Schools 1946-1954; ran away from home at 14, worked as pin boy, bell hop; sentenced 6 mos. Birmingham, Ala., 1958, charge: procuring; enlisted U.S. Army, 1959, fought as private in Chi-Com war, 1959-1961; reported missing in Battle of Panamints, 1961; led Revolution of 1962, became President of United States Aug. 5, 1962; Dictator of North America, Apr. 10, 1963; died at age of 23 yrs. June 14, 1963.

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THE CONCRETE of the pillbox was still moist. As Johnny Dix peered out of the slit, over the sights of the machine gun, he touched it with his finger and hoped it had hardened enough to stop the bullets of the yellow men.

A heavy pall of dense smoke hung over the foothills of the Panamints. On the slope behind the pillbox, the roar of the American artillery was thunderous. And ahead, less than a mile away, the mobile guns of the ChiComs thundered back.

"They're coming," Johnny Dix threw back over his shoulder. His companion's ear was a foot away but Johnny had to yell to make himself heard. "Get next belt ready. Gotta hold 'em."

Got to hold them. It ran through his mind like a refrain. This was the last fully prepared line of defense, hastily constructed though it was. Behind them was Death Valley; it would live up to its grim name if they were shoved back into those open, arid wastes. Out in the open there, the mechanized forces of the yellow men would mow them down like wheat.

But for three days now, the Panamint Line had held. Hammered by steel from the ground and steel from the air, it had held. The momentum of the Commies had slackened; they'd even been pushed back a little. This pillbox was one of a new line of outposts, hastily thrown up last night under cover of darkness.

Something black and ugly—the nose of a huge tank—pushed through the smoke and haze. Johnny Dix let go the hot handgrips of the chatter-gun, useless against the coming monster, and nudged his companion.

He yelled, "Tank going to cross the mine! The switch! Now!"

The ground under their prone bodies shook with the terrific concussion of the exploding mine. Deafened and temporarily blinded by the blast that turned the monster tank into scrap iron, they did not hear the screaming dive of the plane.

The bomb it released struck a scant yard from the pillbox. And the pillbox wasn't there any more.

They should both have been killed instantly, but only one of them was. Life can be tenacious. The thing that had been Johnny Dix wriggled and rolled over. One arm—the other was gone—flailed about, the fingers clutching as though searching for the grip of the machine gun that lay yards away. One eye stared upward unseeingly above a gaping bloody hole that once had been a nose. Helmet had been blown away and with it most of hair and scalp.

The mangled thing, no longer living but not yet dead, twisted again and began to crawl.

Back swooped the plane. Explosive bullets of its prop-gun plowed a furrow of destruction that crossed the crawling thing above its knees, almost cutting off the legs. Dying fingers clutched spasmodically at the soil of earth and then relaxed.

Johnny Dix was dead. But accident had timed with hair-trigger precision the instant of his death. His mangled body lived.

THE NAMELESS entity whom we shall call the Stranger paused in his interplanar swing. He had perceived something that should not have been.

He went back a plane. Not there. Another. Yes, this was it. A plane of *matter*, and yet he perceived emanations of consciousness. It was a paradox, a sheer contradiction. There were the planes of consciousness and there were the planes of physical matter—but never the two together.

The Stranger—a non-material point in space, a focus of consciousness, an

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entity—paused amid the whirling stars of the matter-plane. These were familiar to him, common to all the matter-planes. But here there was something different. Consciousness, where there should be no consciousness. A foreign *kind* of consciousness. His perception seemed to tell him that it was allied with *matter,* but that was a complete contradiction in concepts. Matter was matter; consciousness was consciousness. The two could not be as one.

The emanations were faint. Then he found that by decreasing his time-motion he could make them stronger. He continued the decrease until he had passed the point of maximum strength and then went back to it. They were clear now, but the stars no longer whirled. Almost motionless they hung against the curved curtain of infinity.

The Stranger now began to move—to shift the focus of his thought—toward the star from which the ambiguous emanations came, toward the point which he now perceived to be the third planet of that star.

He neared it and found himself outside the gaseous envelope that surrounded the planet. Here again he paused, bewildered, to analyze and try to understand the amazing thing his perceptions told him lay below.

There were entities there below him, millions, even billions, of them. More in number on this tiny sphere than in the entire plane from which he had come. But these beings were each *imprisoned in a finite bit of matter.*

What cosmic cataclysm, what interplanar warp, could have led to such an impossible thing? Were these entities from one of the myriad consciousness-planes who, in some unknown manner and for some unknown reason, had brought about this unthinkable mesalliance of consciousness and matter?

He tried to concentrate his perception on a single entity, but the myriad emanations of thought from the planet's surface were too many and confusing to let him do so.

He descended toward the solid surface of the sphere, penetrating its outer gasses. He realized he would need to come near one of the beings in order to tune out, as it were, the jumbled confusion of the thoughts of the many.

The gas thickened as he descended. It seemed strangely agitated as though by intermittent but frequent concussions. Had not sound and hearing been things foreign to an incorporeal entity, the Stranger might have recognized the sound-waves of explosions.

The mass of smoke he recognized as a modification or pollution of the gas he had first encountered. To a creature who perceived without sight it was neither more nor less opaque than the purer air above.

He encountered solidity. That, of course, was no barrier to his progress, but he perceived now that he was on a vertical plane roughly coincidental with the surface of solidity, and that from that plane, on all sides of him, came the confused and mystifying emanations of consciousness.

ONE SUCH source was very near. Shielding his own thoughts, the Stranger moved closer. The consciousness-emanations of the nearby entity were clear now—and yet not clear.

He did not know that their confusion was due to the fact that agonizing pain muddled or blanked out everything but itself. Pain, possible only to an alliance of mind and matter, was utterly inconceivable to the Stranger.

He went closer, encountering solidity again. This time it was a different type of surface. Outside, it was wet with something thick and sticky. Below that, a flexible layer covered a less flexible layer. Beyond that, soft

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and strange matter, queerly convoluted.

He was nearer the source of the incomprehensible consciousness emanations now, but oddly they were becoming fainter. They did not seem to come from a fixed point, but from many points upon the convolutions of softness.

He moved slowly, striving for understanding of the strange phenomenon. The matter itself was different, once he had penetrated it. It was made up of cells and there was a fluid that moved among them.

Then, with awful suddenness, there was a convulsive movement of parts of the strange matter, a sudden flare of the un-understandable pain-consciousness emanation—and utter blankness. Simply, the entity that he had been studying was *gone*. It had not moved, but it had vanished utterly.

The Stranger was bewildered. This was the most astonishing thing he had yet encountered on this unique planet of the matter-mind mes-alliance. Death —deepest mystery to beings who have seen it often—was deeper mystery to one who had never conceived as possible the end of an entity.

But, more startling still, at the instant of the extinguishment of that incoherent consciousness, the Stranger had felt a sudden force, a pull. He had been shifted slightly in space, *sucked into a vortex*—as air is sucked into a sudden vacuum.

He tried to move, first in space and then in time, and could not do so. He was trapped, imprisoned in this incomprehensible thing he had entered in search of the alien entity! He, a being of thought, had in some way become inextricably entangled with physical matter.

He felt no fear, for such emotion was unknown to him. Instead, the Stranger began a calm examination of his predicament. Throwing his perception-field out more widely, alternately expanding and contracting it, he began to study the nature of the thing in which he was held prisoner.

It was a grotesquely shaped thing, basically an oval cylinder. From one corner, as it were, projected a long jointed extension. There were two longer projections at the other end of the cylinder.

Strangest of all was the ovoid thing at the end of a short flexible column. It was inside this ovoid, near the top, that the focus of his consciousness was now fixed.

He began to study and explore his prison, but could not begin, as yet, to understand the purpose of the weird and complex nerves, tubes and organs. Then he felt the emanations of other entities nearby, and threw still wider the field of his perceptions. His wonder grew.

Men were crawling forward across the battlefield, passing the shattered body of Johnny Dix. The Stranger studied them and began, dimly, to understand. He saw now that this body he was in was roughly similar to theirs, but less complete. That such bodies could be *moved*, subject to many limitations, by the entities that dwelt within them, even as he now dwelt within this body.

Held prisoner to the surface of solidity of the planet, nevertheless these bodies could be moved in a vertical plane. He pulled his perceptions back to the body of Johnny Dix and began to probe for the secrets of inducing it to locomotion.

From his study of the things that crawled past him, the Stranger had sought and found certain concepts that were now helpful. He knew the projection with the five smaller projections was "arm". "Legs" meant the members at the other end. "Head" was the ovoid in which he was imprisoned.

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These things moved, if he could discover how. He experimented. After a while a muscle in the arm twitched. From then on, he learned rapidly.

And when, presently, the body of Johnny Dix began to crawl slowly and awkwardly—on one arm and two shattered legs—in the direction the other crawling beings had taken, the Stranger didn't know that he was performing an impossible feat.

He didn't know that the body he caused to move was one which never should have done so. He didn't know that any competent doctor would not have hesitated to pronounce that body dead. Gangrene and decay were already setting in, but the Stranger's will made the stiffening muscles move despite them.

The mangled thing that had been Johnny Dix crawled on, jerkily, toward the ChiCom lines.

WONG LEE lay prone against the sloping side of the shell-hole. Above it projected only his steel helmet and the upper half of the goggles of his gas mask.

Through the hell of smoke and fire before him, he peered toward the American lines from which the counter-attack was coming. The shell-hole he occupied was slightly behind his own front lines, now under the barrage of American fire. With eight others, he had left shelter five hundred feet behind to reinforce an advance position. The eight others were dead, for shells had fallen like rain. Wong Lee, loyal though he was, had seen that he would be serving his leaders better by waiting here than by accepting certain death trying to make the last hundred feet.

He waited, peering into the smoke, wondering if anyone or anything could survive in the holocaust up ahead.

A dozen yards away, dimly through the smoke, he saw something coming toward him. Something that did not seem quite human—although he could not yet see it clearly—had crawled through that hellish rain of steel, and still crawled slowly. Tattered shreds of an American uniform clung to it here and there.

Already he could make out that it wore no gas mask or helmet. Wong Lee gripped a gas grenade from the pile of equipment beside him and lobbed it high and straight. It fell true, scarcely a foot in front of the crawling thing. A white geyser of gas mushroomed up—a gas of which a single whiff caused instant death.

Wong Lee grinned a mirthless grin and told himself that that was that. The gasmaskless figure was as good as dead. Slowly the white gas dissipated itself into the smoky air.

Then Wong Lee gasped. The thing was still coming; it had crawled right through that white cloud of death. It was nearer now and he could see what had been its face. He saw too the shattered horror that had been its body and the impossible method of its forward progress.

A cold fear gripped his stomach. It did not occur to him, yet, to run. But he knew that he had to stop that thing before it reached him or he would go mad.

Forgetting, in his greater terror, the danger of falling shells, he jumped to his feet, pointed his heavy service automatic at the crawling monstrosity, now but ten feet distant, and pulled the trigger. Again and again and again. He saw the bullets strike.

He had not quite emptied the clip when he heard the scream of the coming shell. He tried to throw himself back into the shell-hole, just a little too late. He was off balance, falling backward when the shell struck. It struck and exploded just behind the thing that crawled. He heard the clang of a fragment of steel ricocheting off his helmet. Almost miraculously, he was otherwise unhit.

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The impact on his helmet stunned him.

When consciousness returned, Wong Lee found himself lying quietly in the bottom of his shell-hole. At first he thought the battle had ceased or moved on. Then the drifting smoke over the rim of the crater and the constant shaking of the ground beneath him told him that it was not so. The battle continued; the shattered eardrums of Wong Lee brought him no auditory impressions of it.

Yet he *heard*. Not the thunder of battle, but a quiet, calm voice that seemed to be speaking within his own mind. It asked, dispassionately, "What are you?" It seemed to be speaking Chinese, but that made it no less bewildering. Strangest of all, it did not ask *who* he was, but *what*.

Wong Lee struggled to a sitting position and looked about him. He saw it lying there beside him, scant inches away.

It was a human head, or what had been one. With growing horror he saw that it was the head of the thing that had crawled toward him. The shell that had struck just behind it had blown it here, though without the body that had enabled it to crawl.

Well, it was dead now, all right.

Or was it?

Again, in the mind of Wong Lee, that quiet query, "What are you?" made itself heard. And suddenly, not knowing how he knew, Wong Lee was certain that the asker of that question was the severed, horribly mutilated head beside him in the shell-hole.

Wong Lee screamed. He tore off his gas mask as he scrambled to his feet and screamed again. He gained the top rim of the shell-hole and began to run.

He'd taken out ten paces when, almost at his feet, the thousand-pound demolition bomb struck and exploded. Soil and rock from the explosion of the bomb rose high into the air and descended. The falling soil and rock filled completely most of the smaller shell-holes around the new crater.

In one of these, now buried under seven feet of soil, lay the mutilated head that had once been part of the body of Johnny Dix, now the unbreakable prison of an alien being. Helpless to leave his new bonds of matter, helpless to move at all in space or to move in time other than to drift with the time-stream of this plane, the Stranger—until an hour ago a being of pure thought—began calmly and systematically to study the possibilities and limitations of his new mode of existence.

* * *

Erasmus Findly, in his monumental "History of the Americas," devotes an entire volume to the dictator John Dix and the rise of imperialism in the United States immediately following the successful conclusion of the ChiCom War. But Findly, as do most modern historians, scouts the legendary character often given the figure of Dix.

"It is natural," he says, "that so sudden a rise from complete obscurity to complete and tyrannical control of the greatest government on the face of the earth should lead to such legends as those which the superstitious believe about Dix.

"It is undoubtedly true that Dix went through the ChiCom War as a buck private, without distinguishing himself. For this reason, possibly, he had most records of himself destroyed after his rise to power. Or possibly there was some mark on those records which made him wish them destroyed.

"But the legend that he was reported missing during the crucial

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battle of that war—the Battle of the Panamints—and was not seen until the following spring, when the war was over, is probably untrue.

"According to the legend, in the spring of 1962 John Dix, naked and covered with dirt, walked up to a Panamint valley farmhouse, where he was given food and clothing. From there he proceeded to Los Angeles, then under reconstruction.

"Equally absurd are the legends of his invulnerability; the statements that dozens of times the bullets of assassins passed through his body without seeming even to cause him inconvenience.

"The fact that his enemies, the true patriots of America, got him at last is proof of the falseness of the invulnerability legend. And the crowning horror of that scene in the Rose Bowl, so vividly described by many contemporary witnesses, was undoubtedly a trap-door conjuring trick engineered by his enemies."

* * *

CALMLY and systematically, the Stranger had begun the study of the nature of his prison. With patience, he found the key.

Exploring, he tapped a memory in the head of Johnny Dix. A single episode suddenly became as vivid to him as though it were an experience of his own.

He was on a small boat, passing an island in a harbor. Beside him was a man who seemed very tall. He knew the man was his father and that this was happening when he was seven years old and they had taken a trip to a place called New York. His father said, "That's Ellis Island, kid, where they let the immigrants in. Dam' foreigners; they're ruining this country. No chance any more for a real American. Somebody ought to blow Europe off the map."

Simple enough, but each thought of that memory brought connotations that explained it to the Stranger. He knew what a boat was, what and where Europe was, and what an American was. And he knew that America was the only good country on this planet; that all the other countries were made up of contemptible people—and that even in this country the only good ones were the white ones who had been here a long time.

He explored farther, found out many things that had bewildered him. He began to correlate these memories into a picture of the world in which he was now trapped. It was a strange, warped picture—although he had no way of learning that. It was a narrow ultra-nationalistic point of view, for one thing. And there were worse things than that.

He learned—*and assimilated*—all the hates and prejudices of buck private Johnny Dix, and they were many and violent. He knew nothing to the contrary of this strange world and so they became his hates and his prejudices, just as the memories became his memories.

Although he did not suspect it was so, the Stranger was finding his way into a narrower prison than his physical one; he was becoming trapped into the thoughts of a mind that had been neither strong nor straight.

There emerged a mentality which was a strange blend of the powerful mind of a strong entity and the narrow beliefs and prejudices of a Johnny Dix.

He saw the world through a dark, distorted lens. He saw that things must be done.

"Those fatheads in Washington," he —or Johnny Dix—had said, *"oughta be kicked out. Now if I was running this country—"*

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Yes, the Stranger saw what things he must do to put this world right. This was a good country—parts of it—surrounded by bad countries, and the bad ones ought to be taught a lesson, if not exterminated. The yellows ought to be *all* killed, men, women and children. There was a black race that ought to be sent back to a place called Africa, where they belonged. And even among good white Americans, there were people who had more money than they should have, and it ought to be taken away from them and given to people like Johnny Dix. Yes, we needed a government that could tell people like that where to head in. And enough airplanes and A-bombs that we could tell the rest of the world where to head in, too.

But the Stranger saw, too, that buried as he was and in a piece of matter that was disintegrating even as he explored it, there was little chance of his accomplishing any of these important things.

So, avidly, he began to study the nature of matter. He could bring his perceptions down to the scale of atoms and molecules and study them. He saw that in the very soil about him he had the necessary materials, all of them, to reconstruct the body of Johnny Dix. By means of his memories of his first explorations of the incomplete body of Johnny Dix, as it had been when he first entered it, he began the study of organic chemistry.

He filled in his concept of the parts that had been missing from the body from the memories of Johnny Dix and began work.

Transmuting the chemicals of the soil was not a difficult problem. And heat was a mere matter of speeding up molecular action.

Slowly, new flesh grew upon the head of Johnny Dix; hair, eyes, and a neck began to form. It took time, but what was time to an immortal?

One evening in early spring of the following year, a naked but perfectly formed human figure clawed its way to the surface of soil that had been softened by molecular action to enable that figure to crawl out.

It lay quiet for a while, mastering the art of breathing air. Then, experimentally at first but with growing skill and confidence, it tried the use of various muscles and sensory organs.

THE GROUP of workmen on the Glendale Reconstruction Project looked around curiously as the man in the ill-fitting clothes stepped up on a packing crate and began to speak.

"Friends," he shouted, "how long are we going to tolerate—"

A uniformed policeman stepped up quickly. "Here now," he objected. "You can't do that. Even if you got a permit, these are work hours and you can't interrupt—"

"Are you satisfied, Officer, with the way things are run around here, and in Washington?"

The policeman looked up and his eyes locked with those of the man on the packing case. For a moment he felt as though an electric current had gone through his mind and body. And then he knew that this man had the right answers, that this man was a leader whom he'd follow. Anywhere.

"My name's John Dix," said the man on the box. "You ain't heard of me, but you'll be hearing of me from now on. I'm starting something, see? If you want in on the ground floor, take off that badge and throw it down. But keep your gun; it'll come in handy."

The policeman reached up for his badge and unfastened the pin.

THAT HAD been the start.

June 14, 1963, was the day of the end. In the morning there had been a heavy fog over Los Angeles—now

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capital city of North America—but by mid-afternoon the sun was bright and the air balmy.

Robert Welson, leader of the little group of patriots who had failed, for some reason, to join the mass hysteria with which the people had backed John Dix, sat at a window of the new Panamera Building, overlooking the vast throng in the reconstructed Rose Bowl. On the floor under the window from which he looked lay a high-powered rifle with Mercer telescopic sights.

On the stage of the Bowl, John Dix, Dictator of North America, stood alone, although uniformed guards occupied all seats immediately around the stage and were scattered elsewhere in the audience. A microphone hung just overhead and a speaker system carried the dictator's voice to the farthest reaches of the Bowl, and beyond. Robert Welson and the others in the room with him could hear it distinctly.

"THE DAY HAS COME. WE ARE PREPARED. PEOPLE OF AMERICA, I CALL UPON YOU TO RISE IN YOUR WRATH AND STAMP OUT NOW AND FOREVER THE POWER OF THE EVIL COUNTRIES BEYOND THE SEAS."

Over the Bowl cheering rose, a mighty wave of sound.

Through it Robert Welson heard three sharp raps on the door of the room behind him. He crossed the room and opened the door. A tall man and a scrawny boy with a large head and great vacuous eyes came into the room.

"You brought the kid," said Welson. "What for? He can't—"

The tall man spoke. "You know Dix isn't human, Welson. You know how much good our bullets have done before! Why, in Pittsburgh, I *saw them hit him.* But this clairvoyant kid here—or maybe it's telepathy or something and not clairvoyance and I don't know or care—has got a line on him somehow. The first time the kid ever saw him he went into a fit. We can't fight Dix without knowing what we're fighting, can we?"

Welson shrugged. "Maybe. You play with that. I'm going to keep on trying steel-jacketed lead."

He drew a deep breath and walked again to the window. He knelt before it on one knee and raised the sash. His left hand reached for the rifle.

He said, "Here goes. Maybe if we get *enough* lead in him—"

* * *

McLaughin, author of the most famous biography of John Dix; while avoiding direct acceptance of any of the legends which have filled many other books, concedes the mystical aspect of Dix's rise to power.

"It is indeed strange," he writes, "that immediately, suddenly, after his assassination, the wave of insanity which had engulfed the United States disappeared abruptly and completely. Had not the few true patriots who failed to follow his lead succeeded, the history of the world during the last part of the Twentieth Century would have been a story of bloody carnage unparallelled in history.

"Extermination, or ruthless suppression, would have been the lot of every country which he could have conquered—and there is little doubt, in view of the superior armaments he had, that the ravage would have been far-flung. He might even have conquered the world. Although, of course, America itself would ultimately have suffered most.

"To say that John Dix was a

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madman can hardly explain the extent of his power over the people of his own country. Almost it is possible to credit the current superstition of his superhuman powers. But if he was a superman, he was a warped superman.

"It was almost as though an ignorant, prejudiced, opinionated man, narrow-minded in every way, had miraculously been given the power to sway most of the population, able to impress his narrow hatreds upon all—or almost of all—who listened. The few who were immune, battling terrific odds, saved the world from Armageddon.

"The exact manner of his death remains, after all this time, shrouded in mystery. Whether he was killed by a new weapon—destroyed after it had accomplished its purpose—or whether the monstrous thing seen by the throngs in the Bowl was a mere illusion, the trick of a prestidigitator extraordinary, will never be certainly known."

* * *

THE MUZZLE of the rifle rested on the ledge of the window. Robert Welson steadied it and peered through the telescopic sights. His finger rested against the trigger.

The voice of the Dictator boomed through the speakers. "OUR DAY OF DESTINY—" Sentence incompleted, he paused, leaning forward across the table behind which he stood. The audience was hushed, awaiting completion of the sentence before the cheering would rise again.

The tall man standing behind Robert Welson put an urgent hand on Welson's shoulder. "Don't shoot yet," he whispered. "Something's happening. Look at the kid, the clairvoyant."

Welson turned.

He saw that the scrawny boy had fallen back into a chair, his muscles rigid. His eyes were closed, his face twisted. His lips writhed as he spoke:

"They're there. Near him. Like two shining points of light, only you can't see them. But there is a point like them—*inside John Dix's head!*

"Talking. They're talking to him, the two points of light like his point of light. Only not words. But I can get what they're saying, even if it isn't words. One of them asks, *'Why are you here? You seem strange. As though a lesser being had—'* I can't understand that part of it; there aren't any words I know that would say it.

"The thing, the point, inside Dix's head is answering. It says, *'I'm trapped here. The matter holds me. The matter and the memories in it hold me prisoner. Can you help me free?'*

"They answer that they will try. They will all three concentrate together. The combined force of the three of them will free him from his prison. They're trying—"

Something strange *was* happening. The Dictator was still silent, still leaning forward across the table. Minutes had passed, and he had not moved, had not completed the sentence he had started.

Robert Welson turned from the kid back to the window again. To see more clearly, he looked through the telescopic sights of the rifle, but his finger wasn't on the trigger now. Maybe the half-witted kid really had something on the ball. The dictator had never paused that long before.

Behind him the kid sang out *"Free!"* as though it were a triumphal thought repeated from somewhere in his brain. And, although the kid couldn't see out of the window from where he sat, that cry came simultaneously with whatever it was that happened to John Dix.

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Welson gasped, but the sound was lost in the sudden screams and shrieks from the audience in the Bowl.

With awful suddenness the body of the Dictator vanished before their eyes, vanished into a thin white mist that disappeared into the air as his empty clothing fell to the floor.

But the hideous thing that fell from vanished shoulders and lay in plain sight on the table did not disintegrate at once. It was a hairless, eyeless, almost fleshless, rotting thing that once had been a head.

The Outlaw Cell . .

By JON BARRY

MEDICAL men in cooperation with the goverment of Canada and the United States have compiled a half-hour motion picture film which promises to be the first of many similar ones. These films of the future will be intelligent productions which will enable the layman or the non-professional to see exactly how technicians tackle a difficult problem, and will let the average man know where science stands in a given field.

The single present film concerns medicine's most potent enemy—cancer! The film shows how cancers begin—but not why—what medicine does to combat the disease and what success has presently been attained.

You are shown peering into the microscope, the electron microscope, specimens of the disease. Drawings and sketches clarify the process of how the cancerous growths rob the healthy cells of nutriment and oxygen. The gradual spread of the disease through the bloodstream by runaway cancer cells is shown. The complete course of the evil disease is charted in detail.

The spectator is shown scientists at work, listens to their shop-talk, watches chemical and x-ray experiments, sees how drugs and radioactives are used. In short a complete analysis of the state of the disease as far as its known today, is given.

But the question "why?" naturally is left unanswered. Never-the-less the promise is there and it is only a matter of time before scientists manage to put the finger on the killer.

More and more educational experts are turning to the film as a medium of teaching. This coupled with television will in the not distant future, make it possible for a man to know something about everything. When you stop to think about it, there is no place on Earth, nor any technical operation that can't be effectively demonstrated by our modern communication methods.

Eventually the faces of the planets and the Moon will appear in everyone's living room. It is only a question of time. If this keeps up, Man will develop into simply an eye and a arm for taking in all his knowledge!

"When It Rains"

By L. A. BURT

ONE OF THE hottest things on the technological griddle is the matter of artificial rain-making. All you have to do is pick up the New York newspapers to see how important this matter is in the public eye and how closely developments in it are being followed.

Since scientists have discovered that it is possible to cause water precipitation from suitably saturated air by "seeding" with crystals of dry ice, or various iodides, a million experimentees are trying to get into the act with typical American enthusiasm. But like all new technological initiations, this one is slow in developing. The mechanism of precipitation is complex, though outwardly simple, and there is a world of difference between a chamber in a laboratory and the vast bowl of the sky.

Nevertheless, it is perfectly apparent that eventually this phase of weather making is going to come under man-made control. Continual and pressing needs for water in dry areas, great military potentialities, and the lure of the unknown combine to make rain-research particularly intriguing. Not only are scientists working on the matter but a host of lawyers is involved in ascertaining who owns what. If Joe Blow causes a cloud-burst near Plotchacaloosa, inundating its inhabitants, who is responsible if he has been asked to do so by bone-dry Motchacaloosa? This ticklish matter is really no joke.

But before you eat your rabbit you have to catch him. In any vast, large-scale experiments so far performed, no one is actually certain that manual interference has caused the resulting (or coincidental) rain.

The world wide automatic weather-conditioning of the science-fiction novel is not yet with us nor does it appear likely in the near future. But certainly the fumbling first steps have been taken. We may be as surprised as the atomic energy or the rocket skeptics who predicted that it would be a long, long time...

Men have effectively conquered world-wide communications, have nearly conquered world-wide transportation, but there are still a few leagues to go before they mail weather. But don't bet that they won't. Nothing is certain these days, but death and...

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UNITED WE STAND

By Mack Reynolds

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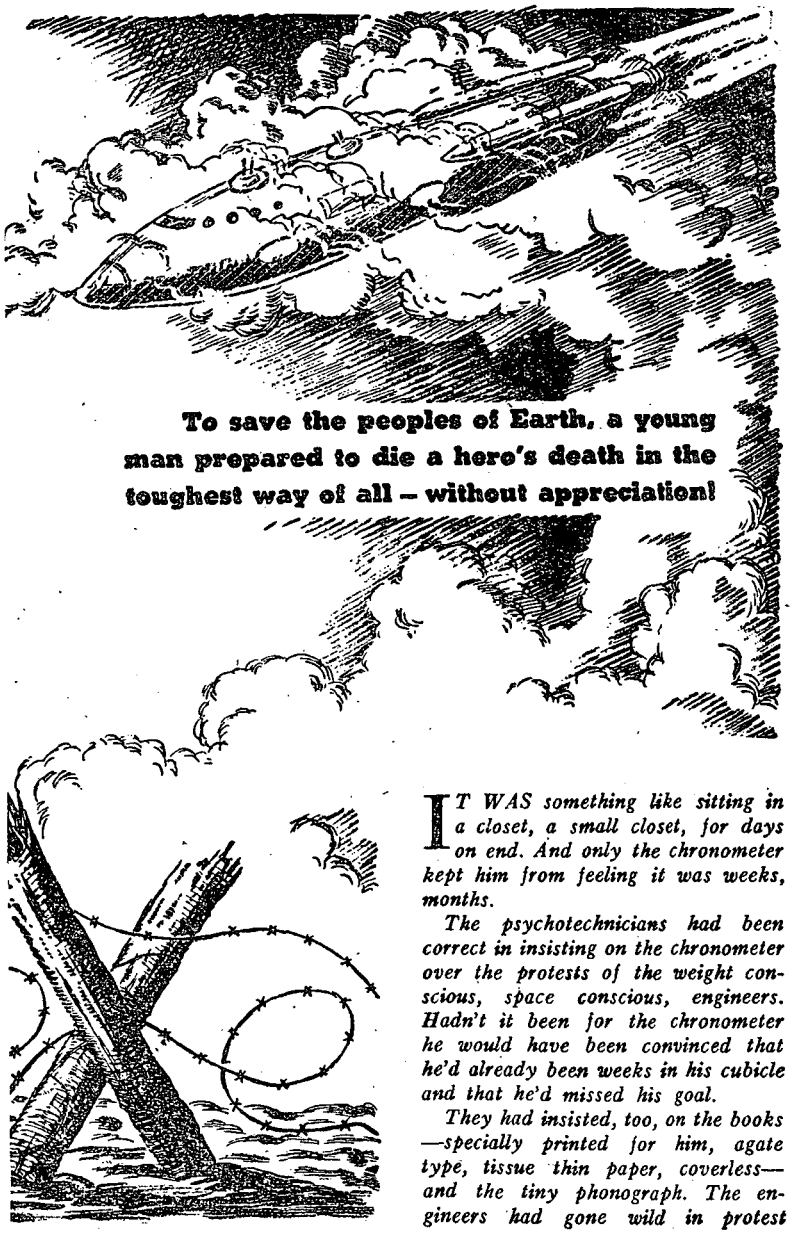

To save the peoples of Earth, a young man prepared to die a hero's death in the toughest way of all – without appreciation!

IT WAS something like sitting in a closet, a small closet, for days on end. And only the chronometer kept him from feeling it was weeks, months.

The psychotechnicians had been correct in insisting on the chronometer over the protests of the weight conscious, space conscious, engineers. Hadn't it been for the chronometer he would have been convinced that he'd already been weeks in his cubicle and that he'd missed his goal.

They had insisted, too, on the books —specially printed for him, agate type, tissue thin paper, coverless— and the tiny phonograph. The engineers had gone wild in protest

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over the books and the phonograph, but the docs had been right. Without them he would have been raving mad by now. As it was, he had something to break the monotony of just sitting and waiting and thinking of the world he had left behind and the one he was approaching.

* * *

Excerpt from announcement by Arch Donelly at Madison Square Garden, July 8: "Ladees and Gennulmun, before we bring you the principal bout of the evening, the contest for the Heavyweight Championship of the World, I would like to remind you that alone in space tonight, more than thirty-five million miles from the home he loves, Lieutenant Philip Albright is attempting the first flight from Luna to Mars.

"Ladees and Gennulmun, I am going to request that this here audience stand and hold a moment of silence in honor of an American hero who is carrying the stars and stripes to..."

* * *

From Associated Press: Moscow, July 8. — Commissar of Defense Andri Goroloff, in a statement today, accused the Western Alliance of taking steps that would inevitably lead to war. He contended that the establishment of bases upon Luna, and the further exploration of space toward Mars, were motivated solely by military expediency.

"Such bases," Commissar Goroloff is quoted as having said, "have no possible use save as launching points for guided missiles directed against the peace loving nations of the Eastern Confederation. They are a dagger directed against our hearts."

He warned, further, that the Eastern Confederation would not long stand for such preparations for aggression against it. "If to survive we must take countermeasures," he warned, "we will not hesitate to..."

* * *

From the Washington World: Washington, D.C., July 9. — In calling for increased military appropriations, Senator Warren Miles scoffed today at Eastern Confederation claims that the Western Alliance was planning aggression. "To their twisted minds, preparations for defense are an attack," he said. "Actually, they would have the world confused on the point of just who are the wolves and who the lambs. It has been done before and we do not propose to..."

* * *

From Station KIO: We interrupt this program to bring you a bulletin from New Albuquerque, Luna, takeoff point for Lieutenant Philip Albright in his attempt to reach Mars. General Arnold Dwight, commandant of the Luna base, has just announced that a radar message has been received from Lieutenant Albright reading: LANDED SAFELY MARS. Stay tuned to this station for further news of...

* * *

From New York Telegraph: Washington, D.C., July 10. — Sources close to the White House made known today that appropriations for further enlargement of the Western Alliance military base on Luna would undoubtedly be doubled within the week. The rapidly developing possibilities of space travel, emphasized by the report of Lieutenant Philip Albright's successful landing on Mars, and the military advantages of the Luna base, are generally believed to be the principal reasons for the step.

The steadily darkening international outlook has spurred defense measures...

* * *

Excerpt from broadcast of Commentator Roy George: "There is both good and bad news tonight, radio

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friends. And here it is!

"First, we have just been handed a bulletin from New Albuquerque, American base on the moon. A further report has been received from Lieutenant Philip Albright, who landed a few hours ago on the planet Mars. You will recall that Lieutenant Albright is restricted in sending, due to the necessity of conserving power, but that he is able to receive communications from Luna at all times. His message is brief but startling, friends. It reads simply: SIGNS OF INTELLIGENT LIFE. No more than that, but how much it says.

"Our second bulletin comes from Long Island where the United Nations Assembly is in session and making desperate last moment efforts to avoid the outbreak of hostilities which seem, at times, only hours away. Secretary of State Fuller Martin, in a strong verbal attack upon the warlike moves of the Eastern Confederation, stated that under no circumstances would this nation accept a situation in which..."

* * *

From Station KIO: Station KIO brings you the latest news flashes every hour on the hour... New Albuquerque, Luna. Nothing further has been heard from Lieutenant Philip Albright who landed on Mars yesterday. It has been ten hours since his last message which reported briefly that he had discovered signs of intelligent life on what had supposed to be a dead planet. Meanwhile, here on earth, a storm of conjecture in scientific circles has been raised by his disclosure... London, England. Prime Minister Winston Clement, in a press conference today, revealed that the full strength of the British army and navy would be thrown into the conflict immediately, if and when hostilities break out. He stressed the fact that the colonies and dominions of the British Commonwealth are in complete accord with the...

* * *

From Station WBCD: We interrupt this program to bring you another flash from New Albuquerque, Luna. Lieutenant Philip Albright, first human to land upon another planet, has been heard from again. The message began, MARTIANS ARE TAK..., and broke off in the middle of the third word. It is unknown what caused the break in communication. Stay tuned to this station for...

* * *

From the Associated Press: Sofia, Bulgaria, July 11. —Premier Josep Kosloff, in a speech to cheering thousands gathered in a mass meeting in the city square today, announced that he has ordered the immediate mobilization of all Bulgarian forces.

* * *

From the United Press: Peiping, China, July 11. —Chu Mao, Commissioner of Defense, declared today that in the eventuality of hostilities between the Western Alliance and the Eastern Confederation, China would immediately march on all Southeastern Asia, "...as a measure of defense against the imperialistic powers of the West."

It is understood that the full military strength of Chu's armies has not been diminished since the recent termination of the civil war and that...

* * *

From Station KIO: Here's a news bulletin. President James Harford has just ordered that all stored elements of the American fleet be taken from "mothballs" and restored to active duty.

* * *

From the International News Services: Stockholm, Sweden, July 11. —

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It was reliably reported today in diplomatic circles of this neutral capitol that Poland and Czechoslovakia have both secretly ordered mobilization of their forces to full war strength. There have also been rumors of divisions mobilizing upon the borders of Finland and Hungary, and large scale troop movements on the...

* * *

From the New York Telegraph: New Albuquerque, Luna, July 12. —There is still no further word from Lieutenant Philip Albright, whose last message from Mars was cut off after the words MARTIANS ARE. It is assumed here that Albright's radar set, used for communications with his Luna base, has failed. In such case it is unknown whether or not he will be able to repair it before his return since neither tools nor spare parts were included in his equipment.

General Arnold Dwight, New Albuquerque commandant, has revealed that a twenty-four hour watch is kept listening for further messages from the hero of the first Mars flight. The general also stated that failure of the radar set will not hinder the return flight of Lieutenant Albright to his Luna base. Although optimism is high, however, Dwight refuses to minimize the possibilities of...

* * *

From the Associated Press: Ankara, Turkey, July 13. —Military circles here have reported Eastern Confederation army leaders expect World War III to last less than three days. Present weapons they claim to possess, will mean complete destruction of all Western Alliance forces in that period.

* * *

From the United Press: Paris, France, July 13. —Marshal Henri Dumar, hero of Sedan in World War 1, predicted today that if hostilities broke out, the Eastern Confederation would be destroyed within forty-eight hours under the impact of secret super-weapons developed by the Western nations. Calling upon his experiences of the first World War, the Marshal said....

* * *

From the International News Service: Washington, D.C., July 13. —It was revealed unofficially today that American military heads do not expect the pending war, if it develops, to last more than a matter of hours.

"Our defenses will hold until we have completely destroyed their military and industrial potential," one source close to the Pentagon is alleged to have stated. "Progress in the development of new and better..."

* * *

From the New York Telegraph: New Albuquerque, Luna, July 12. —There is still no further word from Lieutenant Philip Albright, pilot of the first rocket to reach Mars. More than forty-eight hours have elapsed since his radar equipment failed in the middle of a report to his Luna base.

General Dwight has revealed that Lieutenant Albright was scheduled to blast off for his return flight four hours ago. It is possible that...

* * *

From Station KIO: Ladies and gentlemen, in common with every radio and television station in North America, we interrupt our program to bring you a message direct from General Arnold Dwight, Commander of New Albuquerque, our Luna base.

Come in, General Dwight—

"Greetings, fellow Americans. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of the report I am about to make. I will state the facts barely and leave to my listeners the conclusions to be drawn.

"We have again, and for the last time, heard from Lieutenant Philip Albright. It would be impossible to convey to you just how much it means to me to reveal that it is now the *late* Lieutenant Albright, for we can only

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suppose that he has perished.

"The omissions in the following message are his own; obviously he was hurried in getting the communication through. His last message reads:

"HAVE ESCAPED MARTIANS TEMPORARILY STOP STARTLED AT TERRA CONQUEST OF SPACE STOP HAVE DISASSEMBLED SHIP AND LEARNED SECRET OF SPACE TRAVEL STOP ARE PREPARING BUILD SPACE FLEET ATTACK TERRA STOP BEWARE OF . . ."

"Fellow Americans, that is all of the message. I need not point out to you the almost insurmountable difficulties Lieutenant Albright must have met with in his struggle to escape his captors and warn the human race of threatening disaster.

"I propose the following slogan to be used in man's struggle against these inhuman beasts from Mars.

"We Shall Come Again!"

* * *

Excerpt from the book "Inside Terra": President James Harford, of the United States, was about to make the shortest and the most effective speech of his career; a speech that would go down in the annals of oratory with the Gettysburg address, inspirational words of another president who fought for unity.

He stood before the assembled delegates of the United Nations. There was complete silence. He ran his eyes over them slowly, seriously. Then he spoke.

"Fellow Terrans," he said quietly, without inflection in his voice, "you are all familiar with the message received yesterday from the first human being to reach the planet Mars.

"I shall call Philip Albright, the man who sent that message, the first *Terran* hero. Not an *American* hero, fellow Terrans; Philip Albright is not of one nation, one race, one color, or one religion. In his valiant and successful effort to warn earth, he represented *all* Terra. He belongs to all Terra.

"Fellow Terrans," President Harford paused for a long pregnant moment. "Fellow Terrans. United we stand . . ."

The rest of the sentence was drowned in the hysterical roar of cheers from the assemblage.

PHILIP ALBRIGHT flicked his cigarette away. The things were too damned hard to smoke here anyway. If he smoked inside the ship, he soon had the confined space reeking with stale smoke. If he smoked outside, without his helmet on, of course, the thin air had him gasping for breath after one or two puffs.

He looked out over the desolate waste that was Mars and grunted. What a planet! Not even the lowly lichens that the scientists had been quite sure would be found. Actually, Mars looked amazingly similar to Luna.

He glanced up into the sky and sought out Terra, and allowed himself a wisp of a smile. He didn't mind sitting out the rest of his life here on this barren waste, that part of it was all right; but he would have liked to have known whether or not he'd succeeded. After he'd sent that last lulu of a message, they'd cut off all radar sending.

He figured roughly that it'd be ten years, at the very least, before Terra even attempted to send another rocket here. The next time it would be a fleet, loaded for action.

And by that time earth would be welded into one, united against a foe that didn't exist. United to such an extent that world government and peace would continue even after it was discovered that Philip Albright's message was a hoax.

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AND NO TOMORROW

He was sure that the blast of the atom bomb could not reach him here. Then why was a nameless terror swelling within him?

By Russell Storm

HE THOUGHT, "In the beginning the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep."

The quotation came up from childhood memories. Waiting here, with the hushed voice of the announcer whispering through the loud speaker, "Zero minus ten seconds, zero minus nine seconds, zero minus—" the quotation sent an odd scurry of fear through him.

It was odd that any fear could touch him now, in these hushed seconds before this atom bomb test, odd because he had thought his nervous system was so saturated with fear that it was no longer capable of registering any increase of tension.

This shelter, designed as an advance observation post, was many miles away from the scene of the explosion. It was safe enough, according to the calculations, unless—

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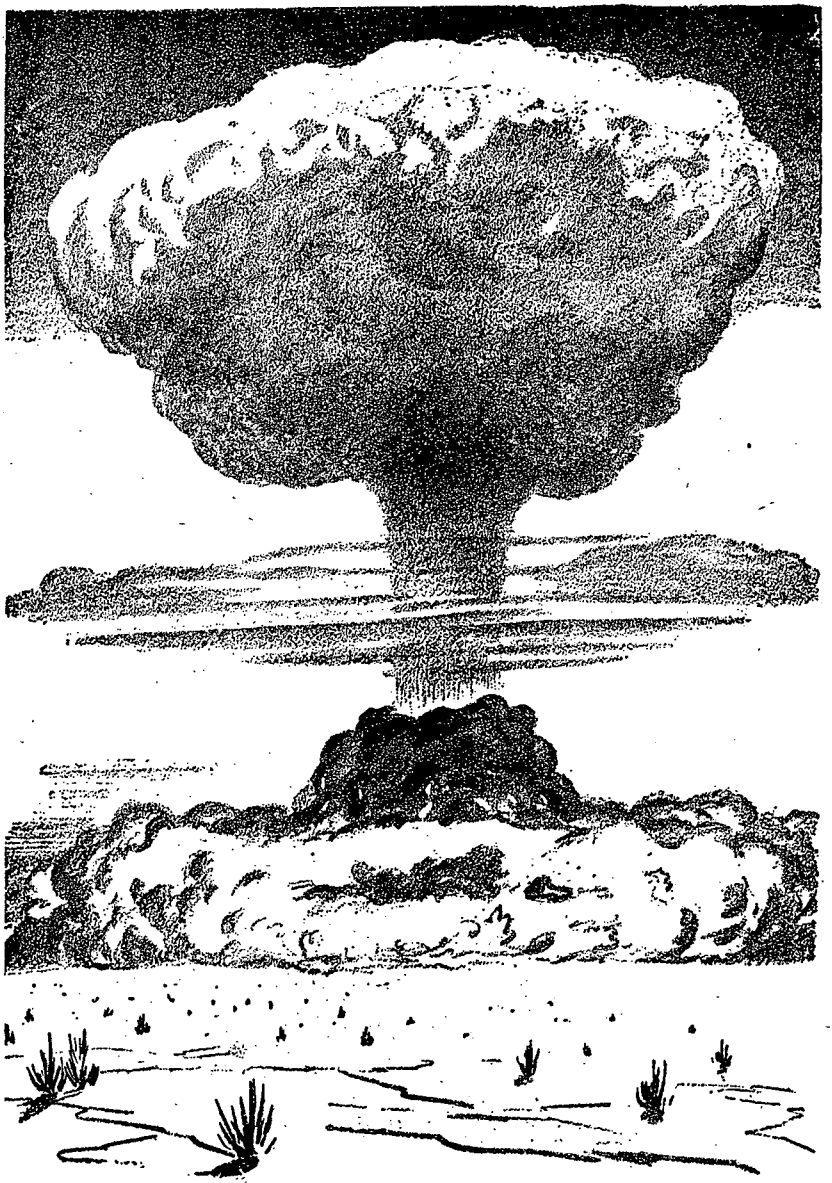

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He thought: "Fear was useful once. Because men were afraid, they ran away—and lived another day. They ran from the mammoth, from the great cave bear, from the packs of wolves of the dawn world, and because they ran away from forces that were stronger than they were, they survived. I wish—"

The wish was meaningless. There was no place of refuge, no cave, no deep bomb shelter that would save him now, if this test was what he feared it was.

"What now, little man?" he thought.

"Zero minus seven seconds," the loudspeaker answered.

In just seven seconds this new bomb would explode.

The first atom bomb had seemed powerful enough when it had been tested. But this new one—

It was all quite simple. An ordinary shotgun shell consists of a primer and a powder charge. When struck by the firing pin, the primer explodes. This minor explosion ignites the powder in the shell.

OUT THERE in a few seconds they were going to test a bomb that used an ordinary atom bomb as a primer. When the ordinary atom bomb exploded, a temperature of several million degrees would result. At this temperature, lithium and hydrogen will explode with approximately twice the violence of uranium.

They thought of it as a super weapon. But what if it wasn't a weapon? What if it was star-stuff?

It was this question that was driving Nicholson mad.

"Zero minus five seconds," the loudspeaker said.

Five seconds more and they would know the answer. He thought: "Write in five seconds the history of the human race, the history of the children of earth. Start with Pekin man, with Java man...."

Evidence existed which indicated that Pekin man lived possibly half a million years ago and that he knew something about fire. For this length of time, men had had the secret of fire.

They had had the secret of nuclear fission for less than twenty years. In this length of time, they had learned to build bigger and better bombs.

"Bigger and better," Nicholson thought. "Always we have wanted something bigger and better."

It was this wish for something better that had eventually made Pekin man into homo sapiens. The wish had always seemed a laudable ambition, except, possibly, when applied to an atom bomb. Maybe there was an atom bomb that was too big....

"Life is an intruder in the cosmos," Nicholson thought. "And as an intruder, it is constantly being kicked out the door."

"Zero minus three seconds."

The voice had acquired a hypnotic quality now. Around him Nicholson was aware of men frozen and motionless while they waited for the explosion that was to come. Probably it had been the same way when the first atom bomb had been tested. No one had been sure then, no one was sure now. The calculations said.... But what if the mathematics lied? What if some unguessed factor existed that made all the figures wrong?

"Zero," the loudspeaker said.

THERE WAS a moment of silence, of nothingness, during which Nicholson was aware of an urge to scream. "Stop this test!" But nothing could stop it now. The

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equipment actuating the bomb was automatic.

The moment of silence ended in sudden frantic sound as meters designed to detect various kinds and various intensities of radiation began to chatter. The first blast of radiation had reached the shelter. There was no sound as yet, sound would come later.

"Stand by for the shock wave!" a hoarse voice said. Nicholson's voice. He did not realize he had spoken. Under his feet the solid concrete jumped.

Nicholson fell. Around him thunder roared. The concrete bounced up and down like the head of a monstrous drum.

"This is it," he thought. And knew he was right. This *was* it.

Two pictures appeared in his mind. The first was that of his mother, the second that of his wife. Inexplicably they blended into one picture. The two women were back in the United States, thousands of miles from the scene of this test.

How long would it be before they knew what had happened? Would the reaction take an hour to reach them? Or would it travel with the speed of light and be there practically instantaneously?

He did not know. "Go quietly, dear children," he thought. "Go quietly away from this earth. Go along now, to your far-off home."

He was not sorry. He was not afraid. Once such emotional responses as sorrow and fear had been useful to the race of men. Now—

Under him the concrete jolted—and flared into heat measured by the millions of degrees....

About three years later, the length of time light uses to travel from the solar system to the star Antares, astronomers on the planets circling this star noted with calm interest the sudden appearance of a new nova—a new star—in that section of the sky which once had been occupied by the planet Earth.

---

those LITTLE MEN!

by RALPH COX

THE FLYING saucer phenomenon has pretty well quieted down, it appears, and we hear less and less of it. Perhaps this is a good sign. This hysterical seizure which seemed to sweep the country, dragging in such sober authorities as scientists and military leaders, is apparently little more than a transient excitement of the type which pops up every few years or so. It is unfortunate that so much time and money and energy have to be expended so needlessly.

The flying saucer reports continue to trickle in, however, and invariably distance seems to lend enchantment. Thus we never seem to actually get our hands on anything but "reports" which are always second or third hand. The few so-called "first-hand" reports made by "observers" tend to lead us to believe that vision wasn't very good that day!

To show just how distance changes things, you may remember a few months back the report which emanated from Mexico and which told of the landing of a small ship filled with little men. This ship was supposed to have been rapidly and efficiently taken over by the Army and no more was heard of it.

Well we happened to be glancing through a batch of European magazines and newspapers when we came on the flying saucer story (this one on the "little men") lavishly discussed in an issue of the *Frankfurter Illustrierte Zeitung*. This worthy paper did our own, one better. It presented a profusely illustrated article on flying saucers with exact descriptions of the little men, straight repertorial discussions of the ship which had landed, and in general handled the matter as if it was absolutely factual with no ands, ifs, or buts about it!

See what the additional three or four thousand miles of distance did for the story?

Invariably this seems to be the case. Over eighty per cent of the hypothetical "eye-witness accounts" seem to have come from places which are remote and inaccessible, and the stories never are repeated exactly nor are the observations made by reliable observers. Well it looks as if the flying saucer thing will die a natural death, but only after an incredible amount of money and energy has been spent in investigating what, at best, can be called a personal "optical illusion."

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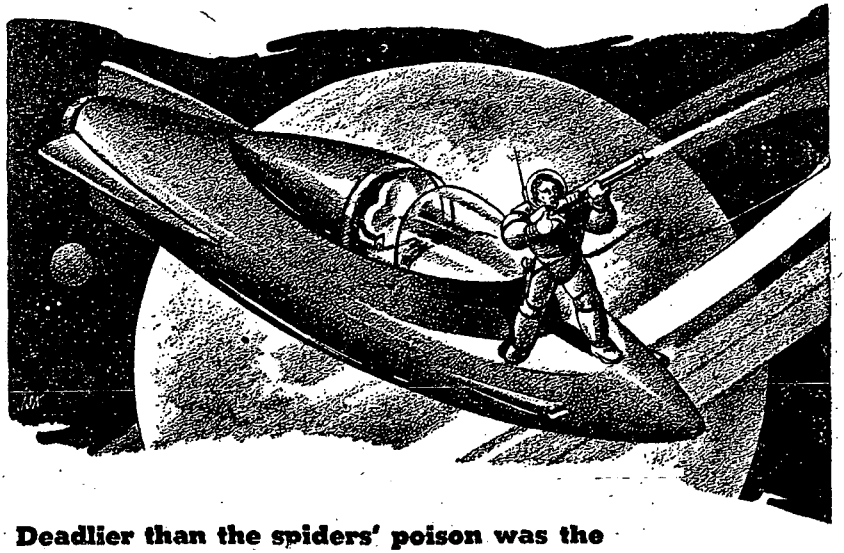
SPIDERS OF SATURN

By V. E. Thiessen

HERE THE surface of the planet was bluish gray and vapourous, too heavy to be called a liquid. On, nearer the Southern Pole, the bluish gray turned more sombre in hue.

The web came drifting through the thin surface of Saturn, its iridescence gleaming pallidly against the blue gray background. It was a heavy web, its strands comparable to one inch rope, knobbed, sticky strands. Tom Lund got one glimpse of the spider, man size, hunched monkey-like in the center of the web as it drifted past.

It roused him from his reverie, shocking him from memory to action. He touched the harpoon gun and the harpoon arched in a high, mortar-like parabola, its thin plastic and steel cable trailing, like some tenuous strand that would not quite let it go free.



Deadlier than the spiders' poison was the hatred between these two brothers because of a girl

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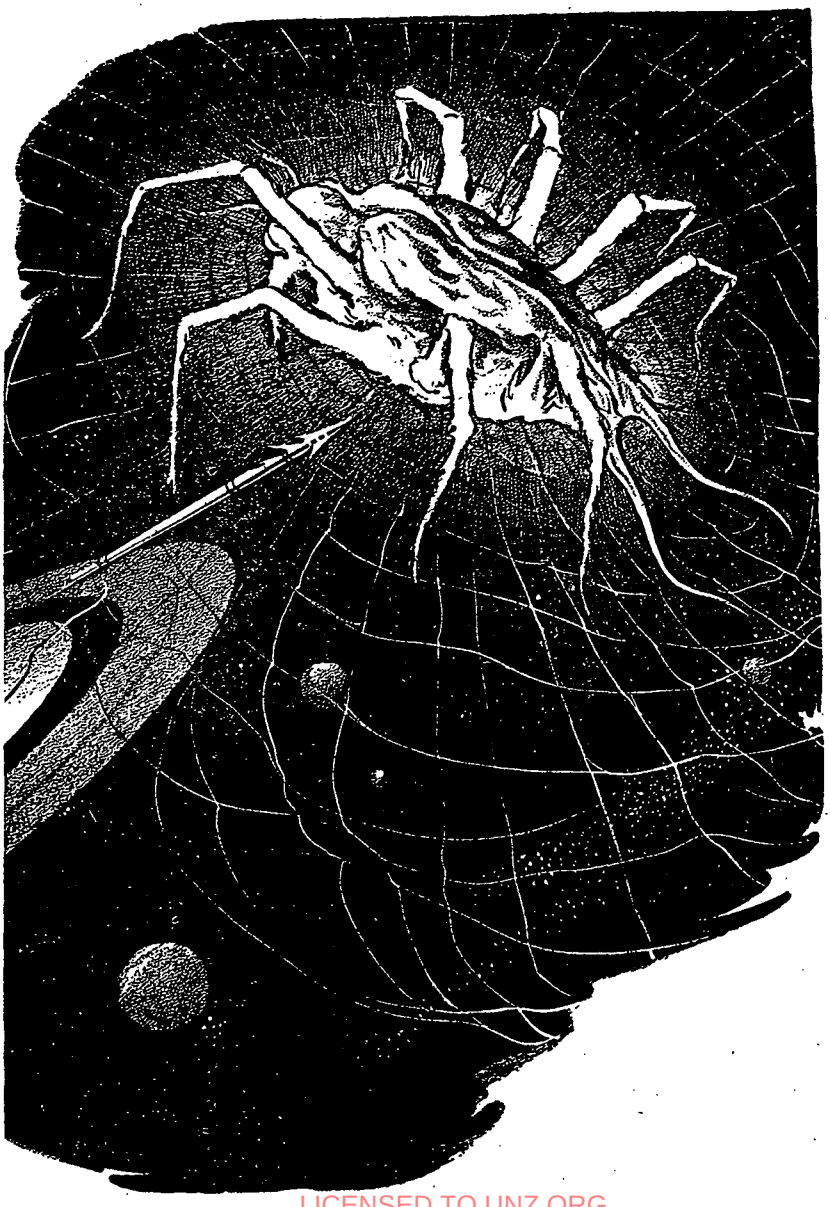

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Standing there, waiting for the harpoon to fall across the drifting web, Tom checked his equipment. Space suit, ready and donned, to protect against the heat and rays emitted by the radio active portions of the surface. Hand rocket, to propel himself as needed in space till he should return again to the lock of the Huntress. Heat pistol to cut the silk of the spider from its attachment to the web, and of course, a flare pistol to frighten the spider.

He was ready. He stood, watching the harpoon fall, and knew he had been too long in reverie, and fired too late. It fell, its thread-like tie to the ship still retaining the hint of the harpoon's parabolic path, dropping where the web had already passed.

The web turned on edge, swirled, and was gone, disappearing in the blue gray surface. Tom's last glimpse of it revealed the red eyes of the spider gleaming wickedly through the murk.

He said to himself, "You've got to get your mind off Marty and get to work. Your hold is only half full of silk." Even now the great rings of the planet eclipsed this hunting spot morning and evening, leaving only midday to seek the crimson silk that was spun by the spiders of Saturn. In a few more days the eclipse would be entire, and then he would move on.

A woman's voice lilted through the Huntress. "Tom—! Tom Lund!"

Tom stepped to the nose of the ship, and looked in the visiplate. He smiled, for the sight of her always made him smile. "Hello, Barbara."

The image in the plate said, "Open your lock, I'm coming over."

MOMENTS later she stood on the floor of the Huntress stripping the helmet from her space suit. She flashed a quick smile at him, and said, "I got a call from Martin today."

He stood, immobile, thoughts ticking through his mind. "You heard from Marty?"

"Yes, he's coming here."

Her presence always stirred something deep inside him. He had loved her even before Marty had chosen her to make love to. Her eyes were wide and gray, astonishingly clear and direct. There was the hint of a curl in her hair, not enough to close a ringlet anywhere on her head, yet enough to lend softness to her face. Now, even though flushed by the trip from her ship to the HUNTRESS, her face revealed its essentail pattern of serenity.

Tom said, "Take off your space suit and let's talk about it."

She stripped off the suit, revealing a slim figure. "He should be here tomorrow."

"When are you to be married?"

"We haven't settled that."

"Isn't that why he's coming here?"

"Perhaps he wants to see you too, Tom."

He looked at her. He thought, *The young fool. Doesn't he know what he's getting. He's hurting her. I'll have to stop that.*

Another web showed briefly through the transparent viewport of the HUNTRESS. It was gone before Tom could reach the trigger of the harpoon gun.

Beside him, Barbara laid a slim hand on his arm. "I'm worried about you, Tom."

"Worried? Why?"

"You're a fool to do this alone. One of these days you're going to touch a web."

He laughed shortly. "What would that matter?"

She said softly, "If you won't think of yourself, thing of Marty."

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"You are right of course. Who would look after Marty?"

She dropped her hand from his arm. She said hotly, "Will you never change? Marty is a man now. He doesn't need to be taken care of. He doesn't need you to make his plans and his decisions for him. He's a man, Tom. Will you never learn that?" Her voice softened. "I didn't mean that. I meant—well, he's fond of you, Tom."

Tom Lund said, "Sure, Barbara, that's all right."

BUT AFTER she was gone he found hunting difficult. He missed another cast in his abstraction before the shadow of the Saturnian rings lay athwart the sun, telling him that this day was over, and with the passing of the sun the little moons leaped into sight, four of them almost full, and two crescent-like, angled crazily in the sky, while the other two were not to be seen, hiding somewhere behind the mother planet.

He thought of Marty as he sat watching the crazy moons, and wondered if this last year of school had taken some of the wildness out of him.

He began to move about the HUNTRESS, checking equipment, checking preparations against the needs of the day to follow.

He thought once, Maybe I haven't been good for Marty. Maybe there is something in me that brings the rebellion out. Their parents had died to young, saddling Tom with the responsibility for his younger brother at a time when he should have been carefree and irresponsible himself.

The fuel tanks were his first regard in checking equipment. He eyed them carefully, checking their content against calculations and a set of graphs. This was critical, the fuel supply. Once the season had begun it was too far, and too time-consuming to rocket back to Terra or Mars for fuel, and there was a constant drain on the fuel to run the repulsors, that kept him hovering above the drifts where the spiders passed. There must be fuel, too, for searching out new drifts when the old played out; or when, as now, the great Saturnian rings threw shadows across the hunting grounds at one hemisphere of the planet. These shadows would last years.

Tom grunted with satisfaction. If he had luck, even though he must move to the northern half of the planet, he would have the fuel to stay till his hold was filled.

Next he stripped the space suit from his body, handling its not too fragile construction with an unreasonable gentleness. This suit was his life. If the joints were to stick, not giving him freedom of action with the propelling pistol, and he touched one of the webs, that would end hunting for him forever. He checked the joints now, lubricating them until they were frictionless in their ease of motion. He hung the suit up and began to strip the harpoon gun.

The visiplate in the Huntress again sprang to life, this time a deep male voice calling, "Tom!"

HE SLID the parts of the harpoon gun beside the breech and crossed the ship. The face of a man filled the plate, an older man than Tom, with a big square face, and hair that was turning gray. There was vigor in the voice, though, and vigor in the face as he spoke. This was Johnathan Ellis, another "silker", Barbara's father. He said, "Tom, I tried the BABY myself. She's a honey. I covered every inch of a hundred square miles, and used

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hardly any fuel."

"Sounds good to me."

"I hear Marty's coming tomorrow. You'll want the little ship when he gets here?"

"Sure."

"Give me a call when you need her, and thanks again for the loan." The big man's face grew more solemn, "About Marty, Tom."

"Yes?"

"Quit playing God to that boy when he comes home, Tom. He's a good boy, and if you let him stand alone he'll be better."

Tom said grimly, "I guess that's my business."

Johnathan said, "Sure, Tom, but you know how I feel about you boys. But if you push him too far, one of these days Marty is going to defy you. I wouldn't want that to happen, ever."

It was late morning, next day, almost time for the sun to make its appearance at the beginning of the short arc above the Saturnian rings, when Tom heard the rattle and scrape of a space suit against the lock.

This is it, he thought. This must be Marty.

A space-suited figure came out of the lock into the Huntress, stripping its helmet as it came. Ice-blue eyes gazed eagerly from beneath tow colored hair.

Tom said, "Marty, boy," and held out his hand.

The figure brushed by the hand, and seized him, locking their two space-suited figures in cumbrous embrace. "Tom, you old space hound," the towhead said, "How in ether are you?"

It was curious, Tom thought, that the sight of one's brother should bring so much warmth. It was a new thought, too, this thought of his brother as comrade instead of child, brought on no doubt by the new solidness that lay in the towhead's body, the new confidence in the gaze of his ice-blue eyes. It was a curiously comforting thought.

Marty looked around. "Looks the same," he said. He crossed to the harpoon gun and laid an affectionate hand on her breech. He said, "Emily still spitting it out, huh?"

"Yes."

"How about letting me try her?"

Tom said warmly, "That's a deal. Stand by, the sun is almost up. The first web is yours."

THE THIN edge of the sun leaped over the high curve of horizon, and the blue grey swirl beneath the hovering Huntress began to take on shape and texture.

One faint thin strand of web showed momentarily, far away, and Marty swung the gun up and arced the harpoon into the sky.

Watching, Tom Lund said, "You haven't changed much, Marty. You still like the thin chance, the odds-against-you gamble. You'll never hit it."

The trail of the cable through the murk continued, bearing out his words. Marty smiled ruefully. "All right," he agreed. "I'll wait for a good shot."

Tom Lund said, "That's the way to get silk." Then, "Have you seen Barbara?"

"I stopped by before I came here."

"Good. When are you two getting married?"

Marty squinted through the murk. "I'm not sure we are. I'm not sure I'm ready to settle down yet."

"Have you discussed that with Barbara?"

"Well—No."

Tom said harshly, "You'll play fair with that girl or I'll break your neck."

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Marty looked at Tom, little pinpoints of light beginning to show through the blue of his eyes. He said quietly, "I guess that's my business."

This was a new Marty. Somewhere in the last year he had learned control of himself, yet Tom knew he was angry, that the rashness was hot within him.

Behind Marty, in the transparant nose, something flashed briefly. Tom yelled, "The web, Marty, the web!"

Marty whirled, catching sight of the drifting web. He aimed quickly, yet this time with care, and let the harpoon go.

It was a hit. The hooks of the harpoon tangled in the web, arresting the drift through the surface murk, and stretching the light cable out from the HUNTRESS. They saw the spider run out, monkey-like, a few feet along the cable to see what it was, his red eyes gleaming balefully at his lack of prey.

Marty clutched at Tom's arm, "Let me go," he begged, "let me go after him."

Tom said, "No. It's dangerous. You can cover me, in case I slip and touch the web. If that happens, shoot straight and quick at the spider."

Marty flared hotly, "I can take care of myself. You've got to stop protecting me sometime."

Tom turned to the space lock, leaving his brother seething behind. He closed the inner door of the lock, and opened the outer, projecting himself into space with a few blasts of the hand rocket. Once out in space, he looked for the spider.

IT WAS to his right, a big one, large as Tom, crouched in the center of its web. Tom was not sure it had seen him, and he touched a tiny blast of the rocket to send him slowly toward it, and adjusted the repulsor beams of his suit, for he was falling gradually toward the planet. He came in then, directly toward the spider, sidling in toward it, the flare pistol extended. The spider had seen him now, and he touched the flare pistol to project a ball of glaring light.

The spider ran back to the very edge of his web to peer balefully at this new development.

Tom was coming in now, firing the flare pistol again and again. The flame was too much for the spider, and it leaped away from the web, its heavier body ducking down toward the center of the planet, far down, away from these menacing flares. From the web, down through the murk stretched the spider's means of return, a crimson, gossamer strand unreeling as he dropped.

Tom came in cautiously. At the last moment, he ducked under the web, and working swiftly, exchanged the flare pistol for a heat gun at his belt. He adjusted it to the hottest beam, and with his left hand swept the beam across the crimson strand, severing it from the attachment to the web, and cauterizing it before the severed end could send touch impulses to the nervous system of the web. With his right hand he seized the drifting end of the crimson strand, and thrust the heat gun back in his belt. Now he needed his hand rocket to return to his ship.

He blasted carefully away from the web. One touch of that web, and it would close around him, its sensitive nervous system as reactive to touch as the fly catcher plants, and far more swift. At the same time that the web enmeshed him a message would be sent along the gossamer strand to the spider, and the spider would be flashing back, to send poison into the helpless prey. It might take some moments to penetrate the space suit, but it could be done.

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That had been proven, to the sorrow of many a "silker's" family.

Tom Lund was back to the Huntress now, tying the strand to the winch outside the viewport on the starboard bow. He was through now, coming inside the lock as the spider came back from the murk, rolling up the crimson gossamer inside itself as it came.

Inside the Huntress, Tom touched a switch, and the winch began to turn, whirling up the pencil size crimson silk onto the reel. The spider was at the winch now, biting at the reel viciously, but it turned on unminding, pulling the silk in a swirling ribbon from the spider's body, winding it tightly. In a few swift moments it was done, the spider was stripped of his silk. When that happened, Tom, watching in the viewport, touched the reverse rockets, and the Huntress blasted away, inertia sliding the spider off, to fall through the murk and start its life again, to spin a new web, and renew the silk inside its body.

Their quarrel forgotten, Marty Lund said, "Beautiful work, Tom. He had a lot of silk too."

Tom turned, to meet the approving blue eyes. He smiled, "Thanks, Marty."

THERE WERE, it seemed, to be no more webs that day. They watched till the sun rested on the edge of the ring, ready to sink, and no more of the irridescent webs came drifting by.

Marty said, "Two hours of sunlight. You'll have to move north and find a new drift."

Tom Lund drew the curtains across the transparant viewport. The day was over. He began to move about the ship in his routine, readying things for the day to follow. When Marty came to help he said, "Never mind. I can do everything myself. Better clean up and go see Barbara."

Marty said, "I wasn't planning to go over tonight."

Tom whirled, "It's been hard enough on that girl, waiting for you, with no one but me to have fun with. You know what most of these silkers are like. A girl isn't safe with a lot of them. Seems to me you owe her some good times."

Marty said, "Same old Tom. Figuring out who owes who what, and what they ought to do about it."

Yet Tom could see he was angry and this new cold controlled rage was harder to combat than the old flaring temper.

The sound of rocket jets, and the voice of Johnathan Ellis from the visiplate broke between them, easing the tension in the room.

"I'm coming over!"

A few moments later the big man was in the HUNTRESS stripping his space suit. He said, "I brought the little ship back for Marty."

The brothers looked at each other. Johnathan Ellis said, sharply, "Haven't you told him?"

Marty was stepping closer, springs in his step, flares in his eyes. "Told me what?"

Tom said wearily, "I bought another space ship, a tiny reconnaissance ship, to save fuel. I figured you could use it to search out new drifts while I worked the old ones."

Marty's voice was dangerously low, "What did you buy it with?"

"I drew our savings for the down payment, and gave paper for the rest."

Marty said, danger still in his voice, "What about me? What if I don't care for this business of silking? What if I want my share of the money?"

Tom said, "You'll stay and help

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with the silking."

Marty said bitterly, "What else can I do till the note is paid? Damn you, Tom!"

"Don't take it so, Marty. The money belonged to both of us; you know that, even the part I made silking while you were in school. But I figured you'd want to help me here, for a year or so, at least."

Marty said in soft and bitter tones, "You would!" and sat down.

Johnathan Ellis let out a long breath of relief. The crisis had passed, but the tension still lay in the room, a sharp atmosphere of strain. He said, softly, "I left a little fuel in the Baby to pay for the use of her."

"You didn't have to do that."

"It was worth it, it saved more fuel than I left in it. I better go now." Jonathan Ellis donned his space suit, glad to leave this atmosphere of bitterness. In the space lock he shook his head sorrowfully, before he projected himself out toward his own ship.

In the Huntress Marty said, grimly, "We might as well take a look at this ship you've sold me into bondage for." He got up, "Come on, let's go see her."

INSIDE THE Baby, Marty said interestedly, most of the animosity lost in admiration, "She'll sit piggy back on the big ship, won't she, and tie in to the big fuel supply for refueling?"

From the fuel gauge, Tom Lund grunted, "Yeah," and then explosively, "Johnathan left a little fuel in her, huh! The tank is half full. That's enough fuel to take Baby to Terra." He snorted in disapproval of such generosity.

Marty said, "Come on, Tom, let's piggy back her. Let me try her."

At the controls, Marty dropped her, feather light, on the locking mount provided on the back of the HUNTRESS. He said then, "She's a little honey, Tom." Then half apologetically, "I don't mind helping you silk, Tom. It's just that I'd like to decide something for myself once in a while."

Tom said, "Sure, boy. I should have asked you about buying her, but it was take her then, or lose her, so I went ahead and took her."

They left the BABY to return to the HUNTRESS. Inside Marty said, "I have some wire tapes of the astronomy trips we took last year. What do you say we go show them to Barbara and her folks?"

"Go ahead. You don't need me."

Marty grinned at him, "Oaf," he said affectionately. He went to the visiplate and engaged Barbara in conversation. A moment later he turned, "Tom, Barbara wants to talk to you."

Looking at her image in the visiplate, Tom Lund forgot his troubles and smiled.

She said, "Tom Lund, you come on over here with Marty, or I'll never speak to you again."

He said sheepishly, "Sure, Barbara, if you both want me."

She said, laughing at him, "We'll always want you. Don't be long now."

ONCE THE Huntress was prepared for the next day, and they had cleaned themselves up, Tom and Marty joined the Ellis family aboard their ship. They were an unusual family, cultured and well educated, in this dangerous profession that attracted mostly riffraff. Besides Barbara, there were two sons, big healthy fearless sons.

Marty drew spools of wire from his pocket. "Where's the projector?"

"Here." Barbara showed him.

He began to thread the wire into

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the projector. Written into the structure of these wires, were both voice and image, to be stripped and thrown as a talking three-dimensional picture, as the wire moved slowly through the scanner. They saw travelogues of the planets, mixed with some astronomical science, and now and then some member of the class would appear, gazing at the scenes, or doing something in connection with the pictures.

As Tom watched, the temper began to surge hotly in his blood. Now and them a picture of Marty flashed, Marty and a girl. She must have been one of the class, but she was always close to him. Now, they were laughing at each other, Marty's arm around her.

Tom knew he was wrong. He should wait—should control himself, but he felt his legs pushing himself erect. He heard his voice, hot and uncontrollable as a blast from his heat gun saying, "You come on home, Marty. I've got something to say to you." He wheeled then, trying to retain some control of himself, donned his space suit, and projected himself out of the lock.

Aboard the Huntress he threw himself, fully dressed, across the bunk to await Marty's coming. After a long time he realized that Marty wasn't coming at all.

Hours later, he heard a soft, faint sound, and opened his eyes to see Marty softly moving his things out of the ship. He got up, moved to the transparent viewport. Marty was putting the things in the Baby. Tom knew then what had happened. Marty was quitting. He was taking the Baby, and quitting, to go back to Terra.

Tom groped for his heat gun. By God, he'd stop that. He had the gun in his hand, and was reaching for the space suit on its hook when the truth struck him, when the meaning of what he had seen in Marty's eyes drove home.

Gun or not, he knew Marty would defy him. He would defy him now, forever.

Out the transparent plate he saw Marty blasting away in his space suit, leaving the little ship still sitting. Tom thought bitterly, Going to say good-bye to Barbara, no doubt.

His rage flamed red again as he thought of her. He got up and went to the control board. The thought struck him then, with all the impact of a blow. *The tanks of the Baby were only half full!* There was perhaps enough fuel to make the trip to Terra, perhaps not. It would serve Marty right if he ran out of fuel, and was stranded in space. He might learn then, if he didn't die first.

And the young, impetuous fool wouldn't check his fuel before starting the trip either, and once gone, if he was a little short, he would be too proud to come back.

Tom thought hotly, I could make it work. I could drain more of the fuel from the tank till I was sure he could not make it. And then, once he was gone, I might help Barbara forget him.

Outside the viewport the little moons seemed to dance in pale glee, a macabre wavering that added to the swirling of Tom's mind. For a time he watched the little moons, till they quieted in their apparent giddiness, and when he rose his mind was crystal clear and hard. He moved swiftly to the fuel controls and began to pump fuel between the ships.

When he was done, he went back to his bed and waited. A half hour later, he heard the roar of rockets, and he knew the Baby had leaped from her piggy-back mounting into space.

He turned on his bed then, hearing

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the faint sounds as she blasted into the distance, and once the sound was entirely gone, he closed his eyes and after a long time fell asleep.

IT WAS late the next morning when he finally roused, and went to get his breakfast. Even his coffee was bitter, and seemed to reflect the feeling that lay so heavy inside him.

He got up, and began to ready himself for the approaching sunrise. This would be his last day of hunting. He knew that. After his action last night, there was but one thing to do. He would go back to Terra. He could not move north to the new location now.

He wondered if there were any chance of catching Marty, yet even as he reflected he knew it was hopeless, for the speed of the tiny craft was far above his own, and the chance of being able to locate it in space, even could he catch it, was infinitely small.

HE HAD no luck that day. The blue gray swirls passed endlessly under his ship, but there were no spiders, no webs, no silk.

It is, he thought, a judgement against me for being angry with my brother. The very swirls themselves seemed to say, "What have you done? Your dream is dead. Now you'll never ride the drifts with your brother. Never!— Never—! Never—!"

He closed his eyes against the accusing swirls, and drew the curtain across the viewport. This ended it. He took off his space suit and hung it up.

There was a tiny bump, as something struck the top of the Huntress. The heart of Tom Lund leaped. *The Baby! That had been the shock of the Baby landing!*

The lock opened, and a space-suited figure stood on the ship's floor. He stripped off his helmet and stood, blue eyes fixed accusingly on Tom.

Marty said, "I came back, Tom."

Tom Lund stood quiet—thankful, saying nothing.

The ice-blue eyes never wavered, "I looked at the fuel gauges, and I came back. I was too angry to look last night." He took a step closer, and his voice shook with emotion. He said, "You great fool. How did you expect to move north without fuel?"

Still Tom stood silent, and Marty said, anger and warmth mixed in his voice, "You'll never change will you? Filling my tanks would have been enough. Just filling my tanks would have let me make Terra, with half a tank left. But that wasn't enough for you. You had to strip yourself and pump my reserve tanks full."

Tom Lund said, sheepishly, "You never know. Sometimes you need extra fuel."

Marty said, level-eyed, "And what about you? Did you have fuel to move north? Did you have extra fuel for emergency on the way in? You did not. If anything had happened you might have stranded in space."

His voice was a hard mask to conceal the depth of his emotion, "Damn you, Tom. It's time you listened to me. I'm going to run things around here a while."

Tom suddenly wanted to sit down. Weakness—reaction was upon him.

Marty said, "We move north tomorrow. You take the BABY, I take the Huntress. You're going to have to get used to the Baby, for half the time you'll use her, and I'll run the Huntress. Half the spiders I go after myself, while you sit back and cover me. From here on, everything, danger, plans, hazard, is half mine. Do

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you understand that?"

Tom said, "Sure, Marty, sure." He was suddenly aware of a great strength in his brother, strength to lean on, to depend on; and without knowing it he had been wanting to lean on someone a long, long time.

Marty said, "One more thing. You put on your space suit and go over to Barbara right away. Tell her you love her. She's been waiting to hear that for years."

Tom said, "Huh?"

Marty grinned at him, blue eyes dancing. "I wasn't at school long this year before I knew it. She wasn't for me. It was just that you liked her, and things you liked always seemed the best to me."

Tom asked slowly, "You've told Barbara this?"

"Yes, now get over there."

Tom Lund got up and moved to the space lock in a dream. Just before he closed the door it was snatched from his hand, and held so he could not close it, and the face of his brother was leering around at him. His brother's voice said, suspiciously mirthful, "You great fool. If you're going out, put on your space suit."

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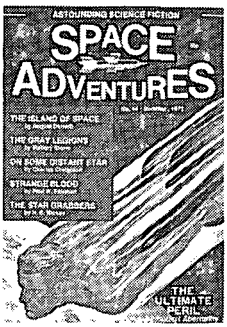

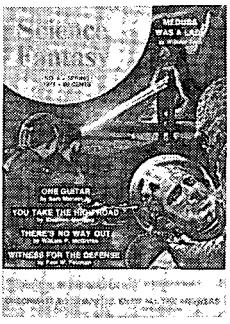

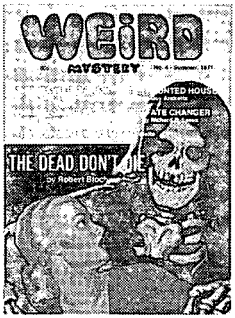

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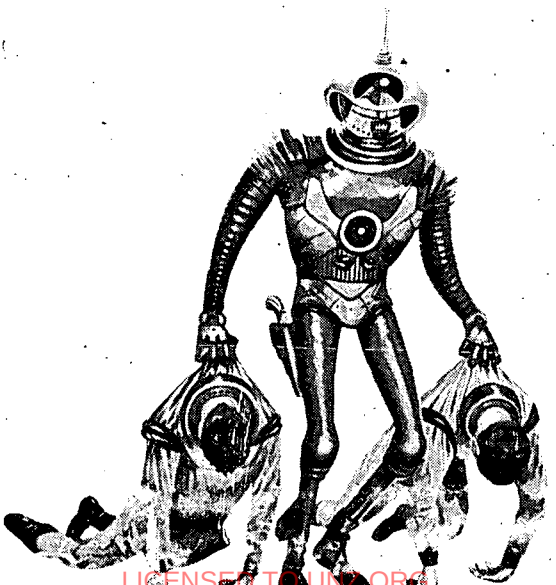

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